

EU COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON EARLY DETECTION AND TREATMENT OF COMMUNICATION DISORDERS IN CHILDREN, INCLUDING THE USE OF E-HEALTH TOOLS AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

A statement with this title was adopted at a meeting of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO), held in Brussels on 2 December 2011. During the Polish Presidency of the Council of European Union, the issue of communication disorders in children in the Union was discussed as a public health priority. These Council Conclusions emerged from meetings of the Working Party of Public Health in Brussels from July to September 2011, which was chaired by a delegate of the Polish presidency and attended by health attachés of 27 EU countries, representatives of the EU Council and European Commission, and experts from the Institute of Physiology and Pathology of Hearing, Warsaw.

Key words: communication disorders • hearing loss • e-health • council conclusions

For a 6-month period – from July to December 2011 – Poland held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. During this time Polish representatives presided over the work of the Council, hosted the majority of the Union's events, and played a key role in the activities of the European Union. In the area of public health two main priorities were pursued by the Polish Presidency: one was titled 'Closing the Gap in Health Status of the European Union's Population' and the second was 'The Prevention of Brain Diseases and Neurodegenerative Diseases, Including Alzheimer's Disease'.

The first priority concerned the problem of communication disorders in children in EU countries, particularly the importance of early detection and treatment of hearing, vision, and speech dysfunctions in children. The general aim is to give affected children equal educational, social, and future economic opportunities. Other topics considered were how to close the gap in health between countries of the EU, through action on health determinants such as proper nutrition and physical activity, and the prevention and control of respiratory diseases in children.

The issue of communication disorders in children was initiated, coordinated, and executed by Prof. Henryk Skarzynski and his team at the Institute of Physiology and Pathology of Hearing, in the cooperation with the Department of Mother and Child in the Polish Ministry of Health. These activities were strongly supported by international experts

representing organisations such as the European Federation of Audiology Societies, the Union of European Phoniatrians, and the Standing Liaison Committee of Speech and Language Therapists/Logopedists in the European Union. They were joined by national experts: the State Consultant in Ophthalmology and the team from the Department of Ophthalmology, Warsaw Medical University, and the Commission of Pathophysiology of Hearing, Speech and Communication Disorders of the Polish Academy of Science. Finally, also assisting were the Management Boards of the Audiology and Phoniatriac Sections of the Polish Society of Otorhinolaryngologists, Head and Neck Surgeons.

This was the first time that the topic of communication disorders in children had been the subject of political discussion as a priority health issue on an EU forum. The discussions highlighted the value of e-Health tools and other innovative solutions as ways of adding organizational value and creating cost-effective models. This initiative of the Polish Presidency won wide approval and gained recognition by EU member states, representatives of the EU Council, and the European Commission.

In the process of setting priority goals, three documents were adopted. Two of them were the "European Consensus Statement on Hearing Screening in Preschool and School Age Children" [1] and the "European Consensus Statement on Hearing, Vision and Speech Screening in Preschool and School Age Children" [2,3]. These European Consensus

Statements were endorsed by experts in audiology, otolaryngology, phoniatry, ophthalmology, and speech language pathology from throughout Europe. Both documents were signed in Warsaw on 22 June 2011. The third document was the Consensus Statement on Vision Screening of School Age Children, also signed in Warsaw on 11 June 2011.

On the issue of communication disorders, the primary goal of the Council Conclusions was to negotiate and adopt a project on early detection and treatment of communication disorders in children. Discussions were held at three meetings of the Working Party of Public Health in Brussels from July to September 2011. Health attaches of 27 EU countries and representatives of the EU Council and European Commission took part in the meetings, which were chaired by a delegate of the Polish Presidency. Preparation of a draft version, and of the final version, were carried out by experts from the Institute of Physiology and Pathology of Hearing, Warsaw. After unanimous agreement, the project was submitted for final approval. Subsequently, on 2 December 2011 at the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) meeting in Brussels, the “EU Council Conclusions on early detection and treatment of communication disorders in children, including the use of e-Health tools and innovative solutions” [4] was formally adopted by the Ministers of Health of the EU member states.

‘Council Conclusions’ represent a political agreement and a declaration of will to undertake specific actions. This is a document on which the member states and the European Commission itself accept an invitation to act. Council Conclusions grant a higher status to the subject described, and therefore the member states and the EU are invited to take it into consideration when undertaking activities and/or preparing programs in the field.

“Council Conclusions on early detection and treatment of communication disorders in children, including the

use of e-Health tools and innovative solutions” directs the attention of society to the issue of communication disorders in childhood, and the consequences that dysfunctions might have, if undetected and untreated, for the cognitive and emotional development of affected children (and therefore for their social and economic welfare in adult life). The Conclusion encourages governments, opinion makers, and appropriate public institutions in EU countries to initiate and introduce actions and programs aiming at early detection and treatment of hearing, vision, and speech disorders in children. The document expresses support for coordinated actions, such as universal screening programs in preschool and school age children. The document highlights the role of prevention, surveillance, and monitoring and the active involvement of parents and teachers.

The Conclusion invites member states to promote cooperation and the sharing of research findings, knowledge, and evidence in relation to communication disorders in children. It also invites the European Commission to give appropriate consideration to the topic in the context of the European Union’s current e-Health initiatives, including the e-Health network, and to adopt the criteria and conditions for European reference networks by the end of 2013. This accords with the provisions of Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients’ rights in cross-border healthcare, and takes into account the history of cooperation among specialist centers for the treatment of communication disorders.

The Council Conclusions on early detection and treatment of communication disorders in children reflect the actual economic basis of our society. In the past, we depended largely on manual labor; today, we depend upon communication skills [5]. So there is a need to direct our resources to a strategy of preventive medicine and medical care that will optimise the health of the entire population.

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