

Road Map for European Ageing Research launched

An ambitious project is set to tackle the grand challenge of Europe's ageing population over the next 10 years.

The FUTURAGE Road Map, created over two years, will provide the European research agenda for ageing over the next 10 years. The Road Map was launched at the European Parliament on 18 October 2011 at a meeting entitled *Meeting the Grand Challenge of Ageing: the New European Research Agenda* and hosted by MEPs of the Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA) Panel.

The document is the result of the unprecedented FUTURAGE project which presents a major step forward in European ageing research. FUTURAGE has brought together 24 partners, 14 European countries, eight stages of consultation and over 700 individual contributors and organisations, representing many thousands of people to create a better future for ageing in Europe.

Europe is currently the oldest region in the world, and the upward trajectory of European ageing has been linear for more than 150 years. The share of the population aged 65 and over will rise from 17% in 2010 to 30% in 2060, with those aged 80 and over being the fastest growing age group, increasing from 5% to 12% over the same period.

The current average of healthy life years (years of life in full health without disability) at 65 in the EU is eight years for both men and women. However, this varies among Member States from three years in Estonia to 13 years for women and 14 years for men in Denmark. The healthy life years gap between European countries exceeds the gap in life expectancy. Both these gaps are driven mainly by the low levels of life expectancy and healthy life expectancy in Central and Eastern European countries. The Road Map aims to tackle the health inequalities across Europe and will aid the EU's target to increase healthy active life by two years by the year 2020.

Despite Europe's ageing population, Professor Alan Walker, leader of the FUTURAGE project, argues in the Road Map: "There continues to be a structural lag between this socio-demographic forward leap and societal institutions and attitudes, for example in the labour market and media. Hence the need for a new vision. This has to be a positive vision in which all older people, regardless of competence and capability, are included as full citizens, expected to contribute and participate and in which they feel empowered.

"The reality of the plasticity and diversity of old age must replace the outdated model of inevitable decline and disability. Later life is but one part of a life course which is characterised by lifelong development. The concept that best captures this life course perspective is 'active ageing', an inclusive paradigm which does not exclude inactive or frail older persons."

The impact of the Road Map is set to be felt across Europe from research settings to end users of services over the next 10 years. Older people featured significantly in the consultation process of FUTURAGE, ensuring that both their views are represented and their complex needs understood to inform the Road Map's

recommendations.

In addition to the detailed research priorities, four key recommendations of the Road Map are:

- Engaging end users of research, especially older people
- Better coordination of existing and future European ageing research
- Capacity building for doctoral, postdoctoral and mid-research career training and structure. Providing infrastructure, support and training to those countries with relatively low ageing research capacity
- Knowledge transfer/knowledge exchange to exploit the results of the research it produces

The Road Map also identifies the key research questions that must be addressed in the near future in order to effectively manage the challenges of an ageing population. Some of these include:

- What role does age based discrimination play in exclusion of older people from service use and consumer markets?
- What are the dementia fears in European societies, what differences may exist between countries and how are such fears affecting ageing people in their everyday lives?
- What are the prevailing norms within the health and care sectors that potentially contribute to negative attitudes towards older people and inequalities? How do these attitudes deter effective health care interventions?
- What is the economic and social impact of age discrimination in the labour market?
- Can we identify a practically useful set of biomarkers of ageing capable of predicting future health and longevity in individual humans?

Funded by the European Union under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), FUTURAGE is one of the EU's flagship policies for ageing, recognised by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, the European Union Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science as: "undertaking the most extensive consultation ever conducted in this field and it is mobilising stakeholders, including medical practitioners, policy makers, industry and representatives of older people to work out the terms of this Road Map."

Professor Alan Walker commented: "This project has been an extraordinary journey involving most of Europe's leading scientists in the ageing field and all other major stakeholders, including, I am proud to say, older people themselves. The fact that consensus has been achieved across such a wide front is remarkable. The Road Map is built on the assumptions of multi-disciplinarity, a life course approach to ageing and a commitment to the translation of scientific research into policy and practical responses to ageing. It provides the basis for Europe to adjust successfully to its unprecedented ageing and for a brighter future of Europeans as they age."

To find out more about the FUTURAGE project visit: <http://futurage.group.shef.ac.uk/>

To access a copy of the Road Map visit: <http://futurage.group.shef.ac.uk/road-map>