

“Too Little, Too Late?”

European policy report demonstrates why Europe should do more for preterm infants

Brussels – 6 May 2010 – The rate of preterm births is rising across Europe, but neither the EU nor most of its member states identify prematurity and neonatal care as a policy priority, according to a new report, launched today by the European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants (EFCNI). This inaction is all the more tragic as prematurity is now the single biggest, and often preventable, cause of infant mortality in both developed and developing countries. The report, *“Too little, too late? Why Europe should do more for preterm infants”* is available at <http://www.efcni.org/>.

“In publishing this report, EFCNI has one clear objective: to give a voice to one of Europe’s most vulnerable, yet overlooked patient groups - preterm infants,” Silke Mader, Co-author and Chair of EFCNI’s executive board, said at the report launch at the European Parliament. EFCNI is the first pan-European organisation to represent the interests of preterm infants and their families. The report is co-authored by Dr. Mario Meriardi, coordinator at the Department of Reproductive Health and Research of the World Health Organization.

Report structure and scope: understanding the facts

Based on desk research and interviews with healthcare authorities, doctors, nurses and parent associations, the report provides statistics, policies and trends in 13 European countries¹ chosen as a representative cross-section of EU Member States. It reveals a troubling lack of coordinated national and European policy initiatives to improve the quality of and access to neonatal care. Such policies and care would help to reduce both the number of preterm babies and to prevent long-term complications.

“Inequalities start before birth. Europe’s children represent our future prosperity, so the absence of newborn infants from the EU’s health policy agenda is not only surprising, but is also short-sighted,” MEP Angelika Niebler, a patron of EFCNI and author of the foreword to the report told the launch. *“I share EFCNI’s hope that this report represents the first step toward coordinated policy action at EU and national level,”* she added.

The report also draws attention to the complications that prematurity can cause as children grow up – ranging from respiratory problems to motor and intellectual disabilities. Indeed, the earlier a baby is born, the less developed its organs and the higher the risk of medical complications later in life. Experience has identified a series of risk factors that increase the likelihood of prematurity, including lifestyle factors (e.g. smoking or high stress levels); medical conditions (e.g. high blood pressure, diabetes or women with multiple births or with uterine or cervical abnormalities) and demographic factors including mothers under 17 or over 35 and low socio-economic status.

These health factors are compounded by a failure of most national governments and at EU level to take preventive action to reduce the rate of preterm birth.

Prematurity: a growing challenge

Prevalence of preterm birth varies across the 13 countries covered by the report from 6.3% in Sweden and France to 11.4% in Austria representing an average 7.1% for the region. It also shows that the number of preterm births is rising. For example, in Portugal prematurity increased by 32% over the period 2004 to 2008 (from 6.8% in 2004 to 9.0% in 2008); Austria saw a similar rise from 8.1% in 1991 to 11.1% in 2008 and Spain registered an increase in the number of preterm infants from 17,000 in 1997 to 40,281 cases in 2007.

¹ Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom

Prematurity: a policy priority?

Despite trends, only Portugal and the UK have developed national policies to improve neonatal health, and only Sweden and the UK have programmes to evaluate the quality of neonatal healthcare. In most countries, the approach to neonatal health policy is fragmented and uncoordinated. Provisions for prematurity more often appear in the framework of other more general health and social policies.

“Specialisation and increased coordination of neonatal healthcare, from prevention to family-centred developmental care and follow up, are crucial. Despite the lack of comprehensive data, these measures should be taken urgently to reduce infant mortality and the long-term complications linked to prematurity,” said Matthias Keller, Member of Board of Trustees of EFCNI, Department of Paediatrics, Neonatology, University Hospital Essen, Germany.

Prematurity: a time for change

The severe lack of data about the economic and social burden of prematurity has helped to undermine the elaboration of effective programmes aimed at improving neonatal care. EFCNI urges national and EU authorities to: 1) acknowledge the health and social inequalities linked to prematurity across member states, 2) introduce systematic data collection, 3) develop and implement coordinated EU neonatal health and social policies, 4) promote high quality standards for prevention, treatment and long-term care, and 5) support greater research, education and exchange of best practices. In the coming months, EFCNI and the national parent associations will be working together with national authorities, Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission (DG Sanco) to drive forward these recommendations.

“It is only by making neonatal health a common policy priority that we can begin to provide a better future for our children and for the future generations,” Ms Mader stressed.

Note to the editors:

- An editorial board of ten neonatology and gynaecology experts oversaw the quality of the report’s content and endorsed the EFCNI policy recommendations. The board was led by Dr. Matthias Keller of the Universitätsklinikum, Essen, Germany and Prof. Hugo Lagercrantz from Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden. The report was produced by Burson-Marsteller Brussels, an EU public affairs and public policy consultancy, on behalf of EFCNI, with interviews and research conducted over the period August-December 2009.
- This report was made possible by an unrestricted educational grant from global health care company Abbott. Since 2008, Abbott has been a passionate partner of EFCNI, supporting the organization's efforts to raise awareness of prematurity and the challenges that preterm infants may face throughout their lifetime.
- The European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants (EFCNI) is the first pan-European organisation to represent the interests of preterm infants and their families. It gathers together parents and medical professionals from different disciplines with the common goal of improving long-term health of newborn and preterm children by ensuring the best possible prevention, treatment, care and support. For more information: <http://www.efcni.org/>
- EFCNI receives funding from its premium partners, Abbott and Nestlé Nutrition, as well as from other private companies and individual donors.

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