

### Workshop 3: Ageing and health, pay for the grey?

Old age and healthy living:

By Ferdinand Koenig, EU Reporter

There was universal agreement at the workshop 'Ageing and health: pay for the grey?' about the need for European businesses and health ministries to constructively engage with ageing populations in Europe. Indeed there was little disagreement on the appropriate tools required to deal with the issue.

As Dr Elizabeth Mestheneos, President of the European Older People's Network pointed out however, agreeing on the methods to tackle problems and implementing those initiatives are completely different matters.

The workshop was opened by with a short video of a computer game obsessed grandmother – intended to challenge the audience's perceptions of older people, their interests and their capabilities.

Challenging perceptions of what older people were capable of was a key message of the workshop. Brian Ager, Director General of the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations mentioned Rupert Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi – still fit and working at the ages of 78 and 72 respectively. Lifestyle improvements, he made clear, would assist people to lead a longer, happier and more active life.

His Excellency Nobutake Odano, Japan's ambassador to the EU, stressed that lifelong working was, until recently, seen as the norm in Japan and he described the ways that technological innovation could empower the lives of older people. Advances in robotics, for example, could help the over-65s to lead fully independent lives – indeed even enable them to assist in looking after their friends and older relatives.

A change in attitudes from business leaders was, all agreed, needed however. Dr Mestheneos underlined that legislation to promote flexible working and do away with mandatory retirement was vital. She also pointed out that work-based training for the over-40s was rarely, if ever, provided by businesses. Given that people in their 40s will almost universally be working for another 20 years at least, this was, she said, a major oversight.

Investing in the future was another area that was universally agreed to be necessary. European Commissioner for Health, Androulla Vassiliou made a strong case for preventative healthcare measures such as widespread screening and investment to help people lead healthier lives. These measures, she stressed, were not just important to improve Europeans' quality of life, but are also economically rational proposals in order to take some of the projected strain off future health budgets.

Commissioner Vassiliou's statements that prevention was better than cure were backed up by Dr Claus Biermann, Vice President of Global Business Development at Philips Healthcare. He pointed to statistics that show that 75% of healthcare costs are spent on chronic diseases. Moreover, he said,

50% of healthcare costs go to people over 65. Investing in widespread screening and in younger generations to make them healthier is therefore, he stressed, extremely important.

Dr Roch Doliveaux, CEO of UCB expanded on Dr Biermann's presentation, by re-emphasising a theme that had been mentioned by all speakers – the need to put the patient at the centre of healthcare. This, he emphasised, would include a reorientation of the way healthcare was delivered – with the home replacing the hospital for many non-critical conditions.

Dr Doliveaux also stated that medical advances mean that survival rates for once fatal diseases have risen – a subject which was touched upon by all speakers from Commissioner Vassiliou, whose speech opened the workshop to Ambassador Odano, whose speech preceded the general question and answer session. People are living longer, surviving once fatal diseases and living more fulfilling lives.

This is to be celebrated. If however these advances are going to continue to enrich the lives of all European citizens, governments will need to empower people to work longer and receive appropriate training, put the patient at the centre of healthcare delivery and invest in prevention rather than cure. The solutions are there, but will Europe be daring enough to go ahead with them?