

Chief Medical Officers meeting on implementing a public health genomics approach

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During the Italian Presidency of the Council of European Union, on October, 2014, the Italian Ministry of Health invited the Chief Medical Officers in Rome for a meeting on the European policies of public health genomics. Following reports on the current policies of public health genomics in Italy and Europe, the policy implications for health systems of advancements in genomics were discussed.

Specifically, participants at the CMOs' Meeting acknowledged the challenge faced in effectively and responsibly integrating genomics into public health research, policy and practice. Additionally, the participants agreed that the translation process need to be supported by empirical evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.

The participants agreed that the application of genome-based technologies and information for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of public health significance still holds a great promise. These advances also raise certain ethical, legal and social issues concerning the potential of genomics to undermine the collectivistic approach in public health and thus equity.

The CMOs also acknowledge the importance of research on genomics to improve patient-targeted care and for technological development in EU Member States, and appreciate the role that EU research programs can contribute to this field.

- Those present also argued that public health professionals and those who are responsible for designing health systems should engage with the genomics agenda in order to ensure proper balance, and to make policy makers aware of its relevance;
- That the financial burden imposed by genomic-related technologies has the potential to overwhelm the available resources for health systems and to broaden health inequalities, highlighting the need for careful planning;
- Member States could, in line with their-own national policies on health, take additional steps to:
 - develop and implement comprehensive strategies or plans in the field, also

- taking into account ethical, legal and social implications;
- collaborate with National Public Health genomic networks (or Task Forces or other appropriate bodies) and national health technology assessment (HTA) agencies to devise strategies for effective and efficient governance of genome-based technology and genome-related information;
- raise awareness of their citizens and policy makers regarding the potential for and limits to genomic-based technologies in preventing and treating major diseases;
- coordinate national available resources for a more efficient and well-oriented scientific research in the field of genomics;
- implement dedicated training courses on genomics and public health towards physicians and other health-care professionals.

Participants expressed their support to the European Commission in order to:

- continue support for actions addressing the development and safe use of genome-based technologies;
- facilitate shared learning and information exchange in public health genomics and encourage European reference networks;
- encourage cooperation and sharing of expertise in the evaluation, monitoring and HTA in this field;
- facilitate the development and the updating of web-based quality assurance and evidence-based guidelines on genetic testing and genomic applications;
- provide special attention to increase the knowledge on the epidemiology of rare diseases and genetic-related risk for major diseases.

In conclusion, the CMOs participating in the meeting called for coordinated engagement with genomics in public health in EU Member States. The timeliness and importance of genomics advances in medicine calls for cooperation supported by the European Commission to share best practice and solutions among Member States. So far, genomics has often been outside the public health arena, yet public health practitioners should take the lead in identifying the best paths for integrating genomics into public health and health care for the benefits of population health.

