Session report to Session 3: Effective communication of sex and gender issues

**Chairs**

Peggy Maguire (European Institute of Women’s Health, Ireland) and Maeve Cusack (National Screening Service, Ireland)

**Discussants**

Sophie Peresson (International Diabetes Federation, Belgium), Laurène Souchet (European Patients’ Forum, Belgium), Dorota Sienkiewicz (European Public Health Alliance, Belgium), Lenia Samuel (former Deputy Director of DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion), Elisa Manacorda (Galileo.Giornale di scienza, Rome, Italy), Paola Conti (Centro il Fiume di Roma, Italy)

**Rapporteur:** Kristin Semancik (European Institute of Women’s Health, Ireland)

**Background/context**

Maeve Cusack presented on effectively adapting health messages to diverse audiences, from providers to patients. The challenge is to develop and provide complex scientific information in a clear, concise and easy to understand way. When identifying audiences and populations to target, one must avoid creating fear in those with disease and the healthy population. The health arena is already cluttered, noisy and full of myths, therefore a guiding principle must be not to increase anxiety, but “normalise” and mobilise health and wellbeing. The aim of effective communication is to create awareness, inform and educate specific populations. However, barriers exist, such as fear of engaging with health services; not wanting to know test results; previous bad experience; embarrassment; cultural issues/confusion/myths; sex and gender issues; literacy difficulties; time factor/busy lifestyle and transport.

Sophie Peresson presented on targeting EU policymakers. She discussed the importance of framing the issue, which includes but is not limited to the extent of the problem and cost of inaction. It is also integral to inform policymaking by producing evidence through studies and reports. Materials and tools that can be used include studies, reports, policy briefs, campaigns, articles in the press, real-life stories, events, meetings and social media. Issues should also be linked to broader policy developments at national, European and global levels. Other channels should also be targeted, such as civil society, opinion leaders, media, healthcare professionals, and academics. Target audiences should be identified by answering questions such as: who are you talking to; what do they know already about the issue; what is at the centre of their interests; and do they have a track record of acting in health? Clear, concise messages and visuals must be developed. The audience needs to understand the issue quickly. Materials and tools should be translated when possible.

Laurène Souchet stressed the importance of different communication strategies for different audiences and contexts. A broad perspective should be involved in the workshops. People generally trust healthcare professionals, so it is important to educate them. Unfortunately, some resources, such as scientific journals, are not accessible to patients.

Paola Conti discussed some of the research and communication needs of occupational health: S&G interaction needs to be understood in specific occupational work-related disorders, risk and exposure factors. Knowledge of multifactorial exposure should be developed in S&G perspective; analysis of costs and benefits should be conducted on gender based OSH prevention; methodologies need to be developed to estimate the socioeconomic costs of occupational diseases, work-related stress and violence at work for men and women; gender based model of risk communication strategies need to be developed; the complex interactions between work-related psychosocial and organisational risk factors,
work-related stress, physical inactivity at work, risk behaviours and chronic diseases and health conditions must be understood to provide an evidence base; and the impact of organisational and psychosocial risk factors in the development of immunological disorders and occupational cancers should be explored.

Examples of best practice/existing gaps

Maeve Cusack discussed the National Cancer Screening Service in Ireland. The aim of the cancer control strategy is to reduce the risk, incidence and deaths from cancer as well as to enhance the quality of life for cancer survivors. The aim of the communication function is to create awareness, to disseminate public health information, and to promote the importance of early detection of cancer and the national population based screening programmes. Gender issues have been identified in the programme. BreastCheck, the National Breast Screening Programme, for women 50–64, identified issues such as women do not worry about themselves so much, but are more concerned with others for whom they care, they look for support and advice from their close circle of friends. In other cancer screening programmes, such as for colorectal cancer, men will be more difficult to motivate to present and will require a bigger nudge to take up services than women.

Sophie Peresson discussed some of the evidence-based materials that the International Diabetes Federation produces to inform policymakers that have been effective such as the *IDF Europe study on access to diabetes treatment*. She also explained the IDF Atlas Map, which highlighted key advocacy messages and figures for each region on the map.

Elisa Manacorda as a journalist said that S&G faces various challenges. Gender is often perceived as a “female/feminist issue” and Gender medicine is often perceived as an academic topic, not related to our everyday life. Also, scientific journalists tend to be not supportive of S&G in their articles, nor include a gendered point of view. “Experts” are men by definition. The key point is to train media professionals and to involve journalists in the communication of gender issues, so that the process of dissemination can be really effective.

Steps for action

*Suggested strategic approaches to improve implementation of S&G*

Maeve Cusack stated that channels for disseminating to the specific age and gender cohort must be identified. Media and other communication channels should be used to promote understanding and to evaluate programmes. A multipronged approach must be taken with regard to contact with health professionals and community groups. This approach involves general information distribution through social media, Facebook, Twitter, websites, podcasts, search words, information free-phone lines, local radio/press, leaflets, factsheets and brochures. More detailed information can be disseminated through academic peer-reviewed articles, electronic newsletters, toolboxes, checklists, textbooks and e-learning courses. An overarching strategy must be taken to effectively engage with audiences, This approach must integrate research and effectively influence behaviour in a combined approach of communications and health promotion.

Lenia Samuel highlighted the need to focus on consensual issues with regard to S&G and involve all relevant stakeholders throughout the process. She recommended a wider geographic spread to include more EU countries, as well as different Commission stakeholders such as DG Justice and Connect and also the importance of informing and involving EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality). She argued for a broad-reaching approach to demonstrate that all of society benefits.

Laurène Souchet stressed that as some resources, such as scientific journals, are not accessible to patients, patient organisations should be involved for effective community outreach. Patient partners
should be involved in the project from the very beginning, not only at the end, to ensure understanding and project quality.

**Dorota Sienkiewicz** recommended that S&G should be considered in all issues concerning public health. Effective communication should take advantage of eHealth and mHealth to disseminate information to the young/minorities groups, such as mobile App (applications) providing information regarding Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Also, information should be prepared and disseminated on infographics concerning sex and gender issues, providing data from EU countries and recommendations. S&G issues should be communicated through short booklets/factsheets to advocate for better understanding by policymakers.

**Elisa Manacorda** suggested involving men in the discussion, trying to make them understand that the S&G perspective is also in their interest. Also, she recommended involving (scientific) journalists to explain the topic in simple words, tying it to the everyday life. Finally, scientific journalists should be trained in S&G issues, to acquire a gendered point of view.

**Paola Conti** said that S&G—the intersection of age and other specific conditions and health determinants—have to be considered with appropriate methods. Research, epidemiological methods, monitoring and prevention activities can be improved by systematically including the gender dimension in order to provide the evidence base for gender impact assessment.

### Conclusions and Recommendations success of the EUGenMed project

Session 3 focused on several aspects of effective communication and highlighted the important role it plays in disseminating complex scientific information across health disciplines and to the public. Key points included targeting key policymakers, the healthcare industry, civil society, opinion leaders, media, healthcare professionals, academics and highlighting the importance of framing the specific issue.

Communication strategies for different stakeholders need to be developed and should include education and awareness to healthcare professionals, the public and patients. Effective communication channels of S&G issues should take advantage of eHealth and mHealth taking account of different age cohorts and marginalised groups. Based on the workshop contributions the following should be considered by EUGenMed partners:

In the future workshops, communication should be an integral part of the planning process and communication included as a topic for discussion. Journalists and other media representatives should be invited to take part in the workshops.

Contributions from participants should be included in the EUGenMed Communication and Dissemination plan and messages tailored specifically for the different stakeholders.

The draft roadmap needs to be developed as soon as possible to allow the Network and workshop participants to provide their feedback in good time.