The European fight against malnutrition

Invited Editorial

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The Fight against Malnutrition is a European-wide, concerted campaign to improve nutritional care in all types of care facilities, such as hospitals, care homes as well as the community. The campaign aims to engage all professionals in the medical field, managers of hospitals and care facilities, administrators of health care and social care, along with their governing politicians, insurance companies, patient organizations and other stakeholders in medicine and care.

ESPEN has taken a leading role in this campaign and is one of the founding organizations of European Nutrition for Health Alliance (ENHA www.european-nutrition.org). Under the umbrella of ENHA a number of key players in the European health arena are active in this campaign including the European geriatricians and gerontologists (EUGMS and AIGG), dietitians (EFAD), hospitals (HOPE), health insurers (AIM) and nursing directors (ENDA) and the Medical Nutrition Industry group (MNI).

1. Malnutrition in Europe

The Fight Against Malnutrition has the overall goal to secure that everyone who needs care for disease, old age or handicap receives proper nutritional care. Over the last 30 years, numerous reports show that many people suffer from under-nutrition or malnutrition. This is also true for Europe, whereas many as 5% of the overall population is at risk of malnutrition. In the population above 65, these figures rise to 10% and those at the age of 75–80 and living at home as many as 20% have been reported to suffer from malnutrition. Calculations extrapolated from the ESPEN sister society BAPEN in the UK to the EU situation indicates that as many as 20 million individuals are at risk for malnutrition and that the cost for society of malnutrition is around 120 Billion Euros annually.

At the individual level, malnourished people suffer substantially more from diseases than necessary. They take longer to recover from just about any disease and from surgery, run a higher risk of various types of complications and are also more likely to die. It does not need and should not be this way. There are many reports showing that nutritional treatment for malnutrition is effective and reduces suffering in several ways. The problem is that nutritional treatment is grossly underutilized in just about every care situation all over Europe. NutritionDay, a large ESPEN supported annual study of more than 75,000 individuals in hospitals and care homes in more than 30 countries in Europe shows that less than 50% of patients eats their entire meals. Most of those not consuming their daily needs did not get any substitution for the loss of energy and protein intake. Those eating less than they should also had a greater risk of dying within 30 days. Hence, whilst a great portion of patients does not feed themselves properly, the ones in charge of care delivery also grossly overlook the lack of intake.

To improve the delivery and intake of one of the most basic needs of mankind – food – a number of actions are initiated in health and social care settings including awareness campaigns, stakeholder engagement and organization, development and updates of guidelines, production of proper educational materials, teaching and training, implementation planning, audit, and for some countries legislation. Lastly, there is a need for improved daily recognition of the importance of nutritional status among medical professionals.

2. Awareness

An important objective of the awareness campaign is to enhance awareness of the relevance of nutritional status for the patients’ health status, among medical and social care professionals. In hospitals and nursing homes as well as in general practice in the community, the nutritional status of patients/older persons should be screened. This is the first step towards mandatory screening for malnutrition, which is part of the solution to identify malnutrition at an early stage.

3. Stakeholder engagement

Ideally all stakeholders participate in the decisions and the practice of nutritional care around patients and others receiving care. This can be organized at a national, regional and/or local level. All European countries need national nutritional care plans, supported by the key stakeholders. By having everyone involved receiving the same information and deciding on actions together, change for best practice can be implemented in a sustainable way. Examples from Denmark, Belgium and others show that a multi-disciplinary approach is the preferred way forward.

4. Guidelines for nutritional care

ESPEN produces guidelines for nutritional care. The two most recent ones published are Enteral (2006) and Parenteral (2009) guidelines. ESPEN currently initiates a new set of practice guidelines based on specific disease areas. In addition, ESPEN is involved in producing global nutritional guidelines with several of our global sister societies. These guidelines constantly need revision due to novel research findings, and for this purpose, a systematic way of revising guidelines is about to be developed within ESPEN.
5. Education

The Life Long Learning (LLL) system for Nutrition, sponsored by the EU under the Leonardo da Vinci program, is an extensive educational program available as web based learning combined with live teaching modules. The web modules cover all major knowledge in the field of clinical nutrition, and are available free on the Internet for everyone (http://www.espen.org/lllprogramme.html). Live courses are being taught at the annual ESPEN congress with about 20 different topics available each year, and also in national and international courses in Europe and in other parts of the world starting with Japan, Brazil and other parts of South America. Over 100 modules are available and come with self-testing, and when combined with live teaching, participants can take a final test to receive a Certification in Clinical Nutrition by ESPEN. The LLL program is developed in English, but many national nutrition societies translate the material to their native language and use the material for their own teaching. To support effective distribution of this material and its use, ESPEN also runs courses to teach the teachers. To date more than 7000 students have taken live courses and over 22,000 web modules. There are well over 120 teachers in the LLL system available and the number is growing. A basic module in clinical nutrition will soon be available within the LLL format to serve as basic introduction to clinical nutrition and to the system itself. This module is intended to serve as what is felt to be the very minimal teaching in clinical nutrition for all curricula for training of anyone in care, including doctors, nurses, nurses aids, social workers and so on. The Fight Against Malnutrition’ is aiming to have legislation for basic training for all care professionals being educated. The LLL system is there for anyone to use, and it is regularly updated.

In addition to the LLL system and the Guidelines, ESPEN also produces a textbook, the Basics in Clinical Nutrition edited by Professor Lubos Sobotka. A 4th edition is being developed at the moment.

e-SPEN, the educational journal of ESPEN publishes many educational publications originating from available educational material in ESPEN and the LLL program.

6. Audit of nutritional care

The Fight Against Malnutrition’ campaign also recommends an appropriate legislative framework for nutritional care audits as part of the basic professional monitoring system for any caregiver. ESPEN and the founders of nutritionDay in Austria currently revised this system to become such a fully-fledged audit system. Whereas it has become a basic requirement to audit and control waste for caregivers, and many countries demand the certification and audit of these processes, there is nothing of this kind to secure that those people receiving care are actually being appropriately fed. As this is a basic human need and the right of every patient or older person, nutritional care should also be an intrinsic part of regular audits.

7. The European level

Several steps in the right direction have been taken already as Europe is starting to act on this issue in several ways. A few years ago the European Council adopted a resolution about nutritional care in hospitals and just a few weeks ago, a similar report was issued for care homes. In 2008, the European Parliament identified malnutrition alongside obesity as the key basic pillars of the overall EU ‘Together for Health’ strategy for the coming five years. This in turn was recently followed by the Czech EU Presidency conference dedicated to fight malnutrition, and held in Prague, June 2009. This conference issued a declaration in support of the abovementioned key measurers to be taken in the Fight Against Malnutrition.

8. Organizing national efforts

The work at a national level is now being organized using the ESPEN council as the network and supported by the ENHA. There are numerous initiatives and improvements already being made in many of the countries in the EU and in ESPEN. However, achievements vary per country and how these messages are perceived and acted upon by the governments and other stakeholders. By showing the good examples and learning from each other, it is the intention to strengthen the work ongoing in every country in the best possible way. A novel forum for this has just been established as a news forum and a site for information at the ESPEN website (www.espen.info/fightagainstmalnutrition). At this site, all available information about facts about malnutrition in the forms of reports and research that is being published will be made available, and we urge each and everyone involved in this mission to post their work or summaries of their work on this website. This will strongly support the work done by others. Allow your success to be the success of your neighboring countrymen and women!

9. Support by ESPEN and ENHA

The Fight Against Malnutrition’ platform organized three plenary sessions at the annual ESPEN congress since 2007. Over 1200 delegates from more than 80 countries around the world attended the last session in Vienna in 2009. This event made headlines all over Europe. Public awareness is also an important part of the mission – malnutrition is not only a matter for the third world – The Fight Against Malnutrition is ongoing in every country around the globe. Please join your national PEN or other professional society and make your contribution to secure one of the basic needs for those we are caring for, the sick and the elderly. There is still a lot of work to do...

ESPEN and the ENHA are ready and available to concretely support national campaigns and initiatives by providing access to global experts, key data and other key sources of knowledge and information as well as help organize national brainstorming and events. Among others, together with the Medical Nutrition Industry Group, a documentary ‘Fighting Malnutrition’ was produced which is available in a short version on the ESPEN website: www.espen.org.

References


Olle Ljungqvist, Professor of Surgery
Dept of Surgery
Örebro University Hospital
SE-701 85 Örebro, Sweden
Tel.: +46 (0)19 602 1000; fax: +46 (0)19 12 54 39.
E-mail addresses: olle.ljungqvist@ki.se, olle.ljungqvist@oru.se

Andre van Gossum, Professor
ULB Hôpital Erasme, Gastroenterology Department, Route de Lennik
808 1070 BRUXELLES Belgium

Miguel Leon Sanz, Professor
Clinical Nutrition Unit, Endocrinology Service Hospital Doce de Octubre Avenida de Cordoba, s/n 28041, MADRID, Spain

Frank de Man
c/o International Longevity Centre-UK 11 Tufton Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3QB, United Kingdom

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