

Press release

ATOME project aims to improve access to pain medicines across Europe

[Aachen, 22nd February 2010]

A new consortium of academic institutions and public health organizations is working to help European governments identify and remove barriers that prevent people, from accessing medicines that could improve end of life care, alleviate debilitating pain and treat heroin dependence.

About 1.7 million people in Europe die from cancer each year, many experiencing severe pain, even though effective pain medications exist. Launched this month in Aachen, Germany, and co-led by the University of Aachen, Lancaster University (UK), and the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Access to Opioid Medication in Europe (ATOME) project will address the legal, administrative and organisational barriers that impede access to pain management for treatment of cancer and other conditions in many European countries.

"We have made great progress in pain management in the last decade, and nobody ought to suffer from pain," said Professor Lukas Radbruch, Chair of Palliative Medicine of the University Hospital Aachen. "But still patients are dying in terrible pain, without a chance to get morphine. Our new project aims to work closely with policy makers and doctors in 12 countries to remove legal barriers to access to morphine and other opioids."

There is great variability across European countries in terms of legal controls of morphine and other opioids. This means that in some countries it is very difficult for doctors to prescribe pain management medicines. In other cases, physicians may be unfamiliar with prescribing this special class of medicine. As well, misperceptions around opioids and dependence can limit access for both pain management and treatment of drug dependence.

With a commitment of 2.45 million Euro over five years from the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme, the ten ATOME partners will work with the country teams, including government officials and public health and medicines experts, to carry out legislative and policy reviews, leading to recommendations that will facilitate access for all patients requiring treatment with medicines controlled under the international drug conventions.

"This is in line with our ongoing work to improve access to these medicines worldwide," said Willem Scholten, of the WHO Access to Controlled Medicines Programme. "The potential benefits of this partnership extend well beyond palliative care. For example, there are around 3.7 million people who inject drugs in Europe, but only a minority has access to methadone therapy. Such therapy not only helps them manage their dependency, but also helps their social re-integration and prevents them using 'street drugs' which increase their risk of harm and lead to infections like HIV from needle sharing."

Professor Sheila Payne, Director of the International Observatory on End of Life Care at Lancaster University, said "This is a very exciting project that will make a real difference to patients with cancer and their families and will help them to cope with the disease, enabling them to live their life without pain until the very end."

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Aachen University Hospital

The University Hospital Aachen is a modern centre for high performance medicine, combining patient-oriented medical treatment, efficient teaching and innovative research.

The Department of Palliative Medicine is one of the leading centres for palliative care research and education in Germany.

Professor Sheila Payne Director of the International Observatory on End of Life Care at Lancaster University +44 (0)1524 593701

Lancaster University

Sheila Payne's post is the first of its kind in the UK, supported since 2006 for five years by the National Charity Help the Hospices. Established in 2003, the International Observatory on End of Life Care is now a globally recognised centre of excellence for research in palliative and end of life care.

Dr Willem Scholten, Team Leader, Access to Controlled Medicines, +41 22 79 15540

World Health Organisation

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. In 2007, WHO established the Access to Controlled Medications Programme in order to promote policies worldwide that balance the prevention of substance abuse and dependence with good access for rational medical use.