UEG Public Affairs Activities: Successes and challenges ahead

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1. Introduction

Conducting Public Affairs activities at the EU level is a challenge as an ever increasing number of medical societies are taking on to represent their interests within the EU. With the start of its EU public affairs activity in 2008 UEG is a relative newcomer; due to the strong commitment of its volunteers and professional support in Brussels the UEG has however been able to get recognition at EU level very rapidly and has since managed to implement a number of very successful initiatives. These achievements have positioned gastroenterology & hepatology much better than ever before in EU decision making processes.

2. Why EU Public Affairs?

Nowadays almost every major organisation is represented somehow at the EU level. Not only large companies have their own representations, but Brussels is also full of bodies like the European Pet Organization, the Breakfast Cereal Association, Euroglaces (representing the ice cream industry) or the European Cheerleading Association.

All these organisations are attracted to Brussels because of the EU's increasing influence in all layers of our society. 80% of national legislation is stemming directly or indirectly from EU legislation. The European Union has a very strong competence in highly legislated areas such as the energy, environment, food, agriculture and trade sectors. Moreover, the EU's implementing policies in almost all sectors, including education, sports and development.

Health is still mainly a national competence, but on the basis of Lisbon treaty (e.g. article 168¹) health policies and legislation have gained importance over the years. The EU clinical trials and transparency directive² affects the work of healthcare professionals and researchers all across Europe while the EU tobacco directive³ has a direct effect on the health of all EU citizens. In addition to health legislation, the EU is, in close coordination with stakeholders in the field, continuously initiating new policies such as the EU Alcohol Strategy, the EU Joint Action in Comprehensive

Cancer Control (CANCON) or the Strategy on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues.

Research is another key element of health related activities at the EU level. With the adoption of the main research funding programme *Horizon 2020*,⁴ the European Union has committed itself to investing over 8 billion euro in health, during the period 2014–2020.

3. UEG's EU activities

UEG is at the EU level very much known for its extensive support to the adoption of the Written Declaration 0068/2010 on fighting Colorectal Cancer in the European Union⁵ which was initiated by Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Pavel Poc and 4 other MEPs in 2010.

Four years later, UEG has established itself in many more areas beyond the cancer field. Over the past year it has for example become more active in the field of Inflammatory Bowel Diseases (IBD), in partnership with its member society ECCO-European Crohn's and Colitis Organisation, and the patient organisation EFCCA-European Federation of Crohn's & Ulcerative Colitis Associations. Prior to that, UEG already engaged in the alcohol field through its membership in the EU Alcohol and Health Forum since 2011.

Two other long standing UEG EU activities are its action each year on the occasion of World Digestive Health Day (May 29) and its annual meeting on current EU Research funding programmes during UEG's annual congress: 'UEG Week'.⁶

3.1. EU Alcohol Politics

After the recent adoption of the revised tobacco directive, alcohol has become one of the most heavily debated health related topics at the EU level. Three times per year severe debates take place within the EU Alcohol and Health Forum between industry and NGOs under the supervision of the European Commission. Important topics such as advertising, minimum pricing, labelling and research are discussed. UEG is contributing to these debates through scientific

input to the discussions and presentations to demonstrate the strong link between alcohol and digestive & liver diseases and providing arguments for additional research to get a better idea about the exact impact of alcohol at the EU level.

This year UEG will continue to work with other NGOs such as UEG's founding member society, EASL - the European Association for the Study of the Liver - and Eurocare - the European Alcohol Policy Alliance, to further promote alcohol research and contribute to the many ongoing policy debates.

In November UEG will be an official partner of the Awareness Week on Alcohol Related Harm and contribute to related events in and around the EU institutions. Together with EASL it will for example host a workshop on alcohol research during the 6th European Alcohol Policy Conference, organised by Eurocare.

3.2. World Digestive Health Day

Launched in 2005 by the World Gastroenterology Organisation (WGO), the WDHD is held each year to raise awareness for a different health theme within the digestive system. UEG has since 2011 implemented each year a small action within the EU on the day to increase the awareness of the day among EU stakeholders.

In relation to this year's theme "Gut Microbes - Importance in Health and Disease", UEG has - in partnership with its member society ESNM, European Society of Neurogastroenterology and Motility, - produced an educational animation video clip about the relationship between gut microbes and citizens' overall health.

The video was consequently spread on WDHD via (social) media channels with the support of many national, European and international organisations active in the field of health. Due to the strong commitment of the supporting organisations and UEG's own (social) media activities, the video quickly became UEG's most watched video ever with numbers still increasing. Moreover, key messages from the video were extensively shared and retweeted via Facebook and Twitter, making the WDHD 2014 social media campaign another success story at the EU level.

3.3. Annual meeting on EU Research Funding Programmes

Every year during UEG Week, UEG invites a panel of experts to inform the UEG community about the extensive web of research funding opportunities

within the EU. In addition, these experts also offer direct assistance to those currently applying for funds.

By encouraging the UEG community to apply and offering concrete assistance during the application process, UEG vows to increase the success rate of its community and hence increase the total share of EU research funding attributed to the field of digestive and liver diseases.

This year, during UEG Week in Vienna, the panel will consist of a European Commission official to provide the latest updates on Horizon 2020, a spokesperson from the Austrian National Contact Point to inform the audience about the funding opportunities under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie programme, a representative of the European Research Council to provide insights on how to obtain EU funding from this more exclusive programme, and a consultant of TPA Horwath who will give practical tips on writing research proposals for the different EU funding programmes.

4. Challenges ahead

In the coming years there are still numerous challenges left for UEG and its partner organisations in the field. To just name a few: Still only a minority of EU Member States has an effective colorectal cancer screening programme in place, thousands of EU citizens annually die because they are not aware of the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption, IBD patients still do not receive the best available treatment in all EU Member States and insufficient research funding is attributed to digestive and liver diseases at the EU level.

UEG will continue to address these and many other challenges in the field, and by doing so, contribute to making Europe a better place for patients suffering from diseases in the digestive system.

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Notes

1. <http://goo.gl/BbU1gn>
2. Directive 2004/109/EC
3. Directive: 2014/40/EU http://ec.europa.eu/health/tobacco/docs/dir_201440_en.pdf
4. <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en>
5. <http://goo.gl/ULs0d8>
6. <https://www.ueg.eu/week/>