



PRESS RELEASE
10/05/ 2016

Wake up call for European policy makers during European Sleep Summit in Brussels

Sleep research experts from 31 European countries united in the ESRS (European Sleep Research Society) met up during the past weekend in Brussels. During this Sleep Summit 2016, representatives of the European Union attended their plea for the recognition of sleep medicine as a formal specialism in the member states. This recognition has substantial consequences for patients and caregivers. The sleep experts also raised the issue of the growing impact of sleep problems on traffic safety.

Figures sleep disorders

One third of the population will at some point in their lives suffer from a sleep disorder. Several European studies have shown that the amount of Europeans with a chronic sleep disorder is consistently growing. There are 84 different types of sleep disorders. Sleep apnea is the most common disorder characterized by five or more breathing stops per hour while sleeping. Breathing pauses may occur 30 times or more per hour. Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) is the leading therapy for sleep apnea.

Age and lifestyle are factors that contribute to the risk of suffering from sleep disorders: 10 to 15 percent of the elderly population has a sleep problem. Also night work and obesity are considered common causes.

The European Summit

The European experts in the field of sleep research and sleep medicine met up last weekend in Brussels to send a strong signal to international policy makers about the increasing need for better education and more academic research. "The past decade, sleep disorders have become acknowledged as medical disorders. As a consequence, the field of sleep medicine has strongly evolved. We are able to diagnose sooner and better, and results show that treatment is effective. The majority of patients with apnea is free of complaints after treatment", said prof. dr. Johan Verbraecken, from the Belgian sleep society. Professor Johan Verbraecken hosted this year's ESRS summit.

Neither the European Union nor the majority of European countries acknowledge sleep medicine as a medical subspecialty, except for Germany and Hungary. As a consequence, each medical specialist is able to open a sleep centre, even if they lack specific academic knowledge or experience in the field.

“Expertise in sleep medicine is more than offering a technical examination to patients. Being able to diagnose and treat patients with sleep disorders often requires knowledge and experience in a broad spectrum of disorders. In order to be able to offer this multidisciplinary approach, it is important for different types of specialists to work together, including pulmonologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, ENT-specialists, psychologists and others.

In order to frame societal evolutions such as the obesity epidemic in Western countries on the growing sleep disorders problem, specialists require more academic research. Therefore the ESRS would like to participate in scientific projects within the European programme Horizon 2020. Without the recognition of sleep medicine as a subspeciality, however, they are not eligible to participate in these project calls.

Impact on road safety

Next to anticipating the growing sleep disorders problem, experts also examine today’s consequences. To raise the issue of the dangers of sleep deprivation and sleepiness to the public health and the impact on road safety, the ESRS invited European policy makers of among others the DG Mobility and Transport to participate in the meeting “Measuring sleepiness: the need for common European rules”. The EU officers agreed on the need to allot financial resources aimed at empowering research on sleep and sleepiness, at educating sleep professionals, and at better informing and general public on the risks of poor sleep and drowsy driving. The development of a tool permitting an easy and reliable determination of sleepiness is seen as a major goal to improve road safety. The sleep experts will indicate that the current medical examination for professional drivers does not exclude sleep disorders. They suggest a thorough screening for sleep disorders. Studies show that 20 percent of professional drivers suffer from apnea. “Treatment can help this specific risk group. Knowing that 1 in 2 fatal accidents are due to a driver falling asleep behind the wheel, putting screening as a preventive measure on the political agenda is legitimate”, according to prof. Johan Verbraecken.