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Health Inequalities by Age, Gender and Income Threaten Life Expectancy in Europe, New Report Says

Cancer and Cardiovascular Diseases Account for Around Three-Fourths of All Deaths Among Those in Europe Over 65.

LONDON, June 28, 2006 – Europeans are living longer and better lives, but significant inequalities exist throughout the region with more vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged, being at greater risk of ill-health, according to a new report released today by the International Longevity Centre-UK and The Merck Company Foundation.

The State of Ageing and Health in Europe finds that excess disability and mortality in these “forgotten groups” pose a significant public health problem. For example, poor older persons in Europe have a 30 percent to 65 percent higher risk of almost all chronic diseases, including stroke, cardiovascular disease and cancer. Furthermore, older women have a greater risk of depression and disability than older men.

Demographic trends have brought a major shift toward chronic illness in the region, particularly stroke, heart disease, cancer, cataracts, risk of falls and incontinence. In those over 65, cancer and cardiovascular diseases account for around three-fourths of all deaths in Europe. But the new report notes that disease and disability do not have to be synonymous with growing old. The information and recommendations outlined in the report may help European societies address the issues of ageing in a positive and constructive manner.

“The ageing of the population in Europe is to be celebrated,” noted the Baroness Sally Greengross, executive director of the International Longevity Centre-UK. “But if we want this

trend to continue, policy makers must factor the needs of an ageing society into the planning, organisation and delivery of services. Equity of access to services is critical.”

While governments in numerous European countries have focused on health inequities to much success over the past decade, many of these public health programmes often focus entirely on younger populations.

“From a policy perspective, age needs to be considered as part of the health inequalities debate,” Greengross said. “The impact of socioeconomic factors, gender and age must be viewed together as they affect individuals’ chances of achieving the best possible health outcomes into advanced age.”

Specific calls to action outlined in the report include:

- Moving away from the “catastrophic and short-sighted view” that older people are a drain on health care resources.
- Recognising that prevention and lifestyle behaviors may be effective in reducing some of the most common diseases of later life, most notably type 2 diabetes, hypertension and obesity.
- A more sustainable model of healthcare that allows for better continuity and coordination of care between primary, secondary, tertiary and social care as well as across private, public and voluntary sectors
- Better information for older persons and their families to navigate increasingly complex health care systems.
- Governments investing further in community services and working closely with voluntary and private sectors.

“*The State of Ageing and Health in Europe* is an important step toward understanding certain policy responses required to encourage healthier, active ageing in Europe, and we’re proud that the Merck Company Foundation has sponsored this report,” said Jeffrey L. Sturchio, vice president, External Affairs, Human Health Intercontinental, Merck & Co., Inc.

“Comprehensive approaches that incorporate innovative ideas for prevention and treatment, and that embrace patients as partners in improving health will be essential to dealing with the challenges of population ageing in the 21st century.”

The report also shows that while cardiovascular disease has a greater toll on morbidity and mortality than depression, depression remains under recognised and highly stigmatised across the European Union. Depression affects 10-15 percent of older people aged 65 years and above. It is also the major cause of suicide among older adults in Europe. The report also

presents a special, in-depth, section on the issue of dementia which is a growing problem for older adults and health care systems throughout Europe.

“There are more new cases of Alzheimer’s disease in Europe each year than stroke, diabetes or breast cancer,” said Dr. David McDaid, a health policy analyst and economist from the London School of Economics and a member of the Report’s Advisory Board. “This Report shows that physicians across Europe need better training to recognise and treat Alzheimer’s disease effectively. Governments also have an important role to play in raising awareness and improving Alzheimer outcomes.”

The State of Ageing & Health in Europe is a resource that presents the most current available information and statistics on the entire health and ageing landscape in the European Union in one concise volume.

In other report findings:

- Across Europe, quality of care for older adults is often compromised by longer waiting times, less attention to detail, and less choice in treatment options.
- Persons over age 80 admitted to hospital have a five times higher prevalence of malnutrition than those under age 50.
- More and better data on persons age 60 and over, including health status, quality of life and functional abilities, is needed to guide future health policies.

About the International Longevity Centre-UK

The International Longevity Centre-UK is a registered charity that works to provide decision makers at all levels with the data and insights necessary to guide policymakers in the planning of future health, social and economic policies. It is based in London. For more information, visit www.ilcuk.org.uk.

About The Merck Company Foundation

The Merck Company Foundation is a private charitable foundation based in the United States. Established in 1957 by Merck & Co., Inc., Whitehouse Station, N.J., U.S.A., which operates in Europe as Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD), the Foundation is funded entirely by Merck & Co., Inc. and is Merck’s chief source of funding support to qualified non-profit, charitable organisations. The mission of the Foundation is to support organisations and innovative programs that: expand access to medicines, vaccines and quality health care; build capacity in the biomedical and health sciences; promote environments that encourage innovation, economic growth and development in a fair and ethical context; and support communities where Merck has a major presence. For more information, visit www.merck.com/cr.