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Reforming Alzheimerâ??s disease care and diagnosis in Europe is imperative

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The European Brain Council (EBC) is a key player in advancing brain health research and policy across Europe, bringing together diverse voices to address the pressing issues of neurological and mental health. As FrÃ©dÃ©ric Destrebecq, the EBCâ??s Executive Director, explains, â??We must restore the trust between science and society for innovation to truly thrive,â?• highlighting some of the key challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the field.

What is the EBC and how does it drive progress in brain research and health policy?

The European Brain Council is a non-profit organization headquartered in Brussels, dedicated to advancing brain research, innovation, and health while advocating for the highest prioritization of brain-related issues in policymaking. Although its primary focus is at the European Union level, its activities extend nationally and globally, addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with neurological and mental health. EBC represents a diverse coalition, including patient organizations, which encompasses both neurological and mental health advocacy, alongside scientific societies, clinical professionals, private industry stakeholders, and National Brain Councils. This collaborative structure enables EBC to unify voices across sectors and articulate shared priorities with clarity and impact.

Founded in 2002, EBC was created to address a critical gap: brain research was severely underrepresented in EU research frameworks, such as FP5 and FP6, lagging far behind more

established fields like oncology and cardiovascular research. Recognizing the need for a united front, EBC sought to bring coherence to a previously fragmented advocacy landscape, fostering collaboration among neuroscience organizations that had traditionally worked in isolation. Its innovative, multi-stakeholder platform prioritized patients, ensuring their needs guided its agenda, while drawing on the expertise of scientific and professional communities. By integrating industry into its efforts, EBC further enhanced its ability to drive meaningful change. This holistic and inclusive approach has established EBC as a uniquely effective advocate for brain health and a key player in shaping health policy within the intricate ecosystem of Brussels and beyond.

What progress has the EBC achieved in advancing brain research and health policy over the past decade?

Over the past ten years, the EBC has fundamentally altered the narrative surrounding brain research and health policy, driving a paradigm shift in how these critical areas are perceived and prioritized. When I first joined EBC, discussions about brain disorders were largely framed in terms of their overwhelming complexity, high societal costs, and the burdens they placed on patients and healthcare systems. The prevailing view depicted the brain as an enigmatic â??black box,â?• with limited understanding of its mechanisms and little confidence in the potential for impactful outcomes from research. This negativity, combined with the lack of a compelling, evidence-based narrative, created significant obstacles to securing meaningful investments and policy support.

In response, EBC has championed a new perspectiveâ??one that emphasizes progress, innovation, and opportunity. By showcasing advances in neuroscience, such as the growing understanding of brain mechanisms and the development of effective treatments, EBC has shifted the focus toward success stories that inspire confidence and underscore the value of continued investment. This transformation is more than rhetorical; it has been underpinned by robust evidence demonstrating that research in brain health yields tangible societal and economic benefits. For instance, while managing brain disorders in Europe costs an estimated â?¬800 billion annually, EBC has reframed this expenditure as an investmentâ??one that not only prevents greater burdens but also delivers measurable returns in improved outcomes and cost-efficiency.

Through studies that highlight the value of treatments alongside their costs, EBC has reinforced the message that investments in brain health are essential for both societal well-being and economic sustainability. This holistic approach has not only elevated the profile of brain health within policy discussions but has also positioned EBC as a leading advocate for sustained progress in neuroscience. By shifting the narrative from one of burden to one of opportunity, EBC has established a lasting foundation for advancing brain research and health policy across Europe and beyond.

Why is reforming Alzheimerâ??s disease care and diagnosis an urgent priority in Europe?

Reforming Alzheimerâ??s disease care and diagnosis in Europe is imperative due to the immense and growing strain that brain disorders impose on healthcare systems. As the leading cause of disability and the second leading cause of mortality, brain disorders, including Alzheimerâ??s, represent a unique challenge. These are not conditions that patients typically die from but rather live with for prolonged periods, which places significant demands on healthcare resources and affects societal productivity, inclusion, and quality of life. The World Health Organizationâ??s definition of brain health underscores this, emphasizing not only the medical but also the social and psychological dimensions of these conditions.

The existing healthcare system, however, is ill-prepared to address the escalating needs associated with Alzheimerâ??s. Critical gaps include the lack of robust early detection mechanisms, inconsistencies in diagnostic accuracy, and insufficient infrastructure to support the integration of emerging therapies into care pathways. These deficiencies persist despite advances in neuroscience that have yielded promising treatments, highlighting systemic barriers that hinder the translation of innovation into meaningful patient outcomes.

The EBC has recognized the need for a paradigm shift, advocating for a holistic approach to Alzheimerâ??s care that integrates scientific breakthroughs into practical, patient-centered solutions as part of the Rethinking Alzheimerâ??s disease project. This shift is also exemplified by initiatives such as the Brain Innovation Days, which celebrate progress in neuroscience and brain research while tackling the challenges of implementation. A comprehensive approach to Alzheimerâ??s must encompass early and accurate diagnosis, targeted treatment strategies, and continuous patient monitoring, ensuring that innovations not only reach patients but also deliver measurable improvements in their care.

Compounding these challenges is the regulatory landscape, which often evaluates therapies in isolation, overlooking the broader context of integrated care pathways. Reforming Alzheimerâ??s care requires healthcare systems to evolve, embracing innovations as part of a sustainable and inclusive model. Without this evolution, the growing prevalence of Alzheimerâ??s and other cognitive disorders risks overwhelming existing systems, particularly as Europeâ??s population continues to age. By prioritizing reform, policymakers can safeguard the sustainability of healthcare infrastructure while addressing the urgent needs of patients and society.

How does the EBC work to elevate brain health amid competing healthcare priorities?

The EBC recognizes that brain health must be elevated alongside other critical health priorities, not in competition with them. Rather than diminishing the importance of areas such as cancer or cardiovascular diseases, EBC advocates for a â??One Healthâ?• approach, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of health conditions and the need for holistic strategies. Brain disorders, which encompass both neurological and mental health conditions, represent the leading cause of disability and a profound societal challenge. However, their recognition in health policy and funding often lags behind other fields, necessitating a concerted effort to address this disparity.

In recent years, EBC has made significant progress in raising the profile of brain health. A notable achievement was the launch of a manifesto in the framework of the No Health Without Brain Health campaign during the 2024 European Parliament elections, which united over 120 organizations from the brain health community in a call for a coordinated European strategy. This effort resulted in commitments from Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to prioritize brain health alongside other key health issues, such as cardiovascular diseases and rare diseases, within future health policies.

Additionally, EBC has contributed to pivotal initiatives that underscore the growing recognition of brain healthâ??s importance. The European Partnership for Brain Health, supported by the Horizon Europe program, fosters collaboration in brain research and innovation. Similarly, the Healthier Together initiative, part of the European Commissionâ??s strategy on non-communicable diseases, now includes a dedicated pillar addressing mental and neurological health. While these developments reflect progress, EBC continues to advocate for a more cohesive and ambitious vision that integrates these efforts into a unified framework capable of delivering sustained impact.

EBCâ??s approach is rooted in fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders and advancing a holistic strategy that places brain health on equal footing with other critical health priorities. By bridging gaps between research, policy, and patient care, EBC aims to ensure that brain health becomes a central component of European healthcare systems, addressing the challenges posed by brain disorders while supporting the broader goal of improving human well-being.

What challenges does Europe face in maintaining competitiveness in brain health research, and how can they be addressed?

Europeâ??s status as a leader in brain health research is increasingly at risk as global innovation shifts toward regions like the United States and China. While Europe remains strong in basic neuroscience, its research ecosystem is under mounting pressure. Chinaâ??s rise is particularly notable, as it rapidly attracts global talent, including from Europe, by offering advanced research facilities, substantial funding, and competitive working conditions. This highlights a growing disparity and underscores the need for Europe to reassess its strategies to remain competitive in this vital field.

One significant challenge lies in Europeâ??s regulatory framework, particularly concerning biomedical research involving animal models. While the regionâ??s commitment to animal welfare reflects its societal values, the necessity of such research for understanding complex brain disorders is often overlooked in public discourse. This opposition, coupled with increasingly restrictive policies, risks driving critical research to less regulated regions. Meanwhile, Chinaâ??s more flexible approach continues to appeal to scientists seeking fewer limitations and greater support for curiosity-driven innovation.

However, Europeâ??s regulatory standards, often viewed as a constraint, have the potential to be reframed as an asset. By leveraging its rigorous oversight to ensure unparalleled research quality, safety, and reliability, Europe can differentiate itself on the global stage. This requires not only a commitment to fostering cutting-edge research environments but also a reimagined narrative that highlights the continentâ??s strengths in ethical, high-quality innovation.

Encouragingly, recent EU initiatives signal a recognition of these challenges. Science-based innovation has been positioned as a cornerstone of efforts to restore Europeâ??s competitiveness, with the Draghi Report offering a bold vision for reinvigorating research and development. Yet, the success of these efforts hinges on translating ambition into actionâ??developing policies that provide tangible support for researchers, incentivize innovation, and align with Europeâ??s broader goals of sustainability and inclusivity.

To remain competitive, Europe must foster a unified, forward-thinking approach that balances its commitment to high standards with the flexibility to adapt to an evolving global landscape. By addressing systemic barriers, investing in talent and infrastructure, and positioning itself as a role model for responsible and impactful innovation, Europe can reassert its leadership in brain health research while contributing meaningfully to global progress.

What opportunities and challenges do new diagnostic tools for Alzheimerâ??s disease present, and how can Europe prepare for their adoption?

The introduction of advanced diagnostic tools, particularly blood-based biomarkers, signifies a transformative breakthrough in the early detection of Alzheimerâ??s disease. These innovations

have the potential to fundamentally change how the disease is identified and managed, enabling earlier interventions that could significantly improve patient outcomes. However, their successful integration into Europeâ??s healthcare systems depends on critical factors such as clinical validation and consensus among regulatory bodies to establish these biomarkers as standardized tools. Complementing these advances, digital technologiesâ??including smartphone-integrated diagnostics and neuro-gamesâ??are further expanding possibilities for early and accessible detection.

Alzheimerâ??s research is also advancing in previously unimaginable directions, such as the development of a vaccine. These milestones reflect the growing momentum in the field but also underscore a pressing question: Is Europe equipped to integrate such transformative advancements into its healthcare systems? While Europeâ??s centralized, single-payer healthcare models offer significant advantages, such as comprehensive datasets for real-world evidence and clinical trials, their inherent rigidity can hinder the rapid adoption of disruptive technologies and the necessary reconfiguration of care pathways.

Addressing these challenges requires a cultural and systemic shift. Europeâ??s robust healthcare infrastructure provides a strong foundation, but it must evolve to embrace innovation and adapt care models to support these advancements effectively. By fostering readiness across regulatory, clinical, and cultural dimensions, Europe can not only lead in Alzheimerâ??s care but also ensure these groundbreaking tools deliver meaningful benefits to patients and healthcare systems alike.

What advancements in brain health offer optimism for the future, and what challenges do you foresee over the next decade?

The future of brain health is bright, fueled by significant advancements that are already transforming patient care. For conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS) and migraines, innovative treatments have brought about profound changes. In MS, disease-modifying therapies have emerged as a breakthrough, offering patients improved outcomes and hope that was once unthinkable. Similarly, new approaches to preventing migraines are reshaping the way patients experience their daily lives, providing relief and improving quality of life. These developments highlight not only the progress in treatment but also the real-world impact on patientsâ?? well-being, underscoring the immense potential of continued research.

Despite these positive strides, there are notable challenges that could shape the next decade. The growing distrust in science, fueled by misinformation and the rise of social media, poses a serious threat to public understanding of scientific progress. Unqualified voices often challenge established research, undermining the credibility of scientific institutions and making it harder for experts to communicate effectively with the public. This erosion of trust is compounded by the increasing difficulty scientists face in engaging meaningfully with society, which hampers efforts to convey the importance of evidence-based policy decisions.

In facing these challenges, it is crucial to restore confidence in science and reaffirm its value in shaping policy and societal progress. The next decade holds great potential, but it will require a collective effort to bridge the gap between research, policy, and the public, ensuring that advancements in brain health continue to thrive and translate into tangible benefits for people living with brain conditions.

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