In an act to promote healthy living, improve healthcare and support active ageing, the European Institute for Innovation and Technology has launched EIT Health. Interim CEO Dr Ursula Redeker shares details of how the initiative is combining business, research and education in order to meet its goals.
ONE MORNING OUT of every week Margaret Morgan, age 78, drives herself, her friends and some homemade cakes down to her local church to chat over coffee and baked goods. During this time, she not only catches up on her friends’ activities, but she also serves beverages and food to others. Being involved in social engagements helps her to help others is a big part of Morgan’s life, especially since she retired from her position as a district nurse for the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) in 1992. “It’s really important to help other people; I find that it helps me because it stops me from being inward-looking and keeps me fresh and active,” she enthuses.

Encouraging community members to stay active – both physically and mentally – is a rapidly growing goal for many Western countries, especially in light of the fact that by 2025, one in every five Europeans will be over the age of 65. For many young people, it is at this age that they begin to experience long-term, age-related health issues. Morgan’s own life provides the perfect example: in the past three years, she has had two surgical procedures – one for ptosis and one for varicose veins, both of which are conditions for which age is a risk factor.

According to the European Commission, ageing is one of the greatest social and economic challenges of the 21st Century. At the rate at which the region’s population is ‘greying’, there is little doubt that this trend will affect all European Union (EU) countries and most policy areas. Countries will be faced with important questions such as how they will afford to provide appropriate care – which at current trends is projected to eat up 13 per cent of Europe’s GDP by 2060 – and who will provide this care.

DEACTIVATING THE TICKING ‘AGE-BOMB’

Policy makers are attempting to encourage active ageing and other highly important health issues within the scope of the European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT). An independent arm of the EU and an integral part of Horizon 2020, EIT began in 2008 with a very important goal. “We are working to enhance Europe’s ability to innovate and advance its global competitiveness by focusing on and nurturing our entrepreneurial talent and most promising innovations,” states Peter Olesen, Chairman of the EIT Governing Board.

The approach EIT is taking to innovation involves fully integrating business, education and research within the scope of Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs). The first three KICs started in 2010 and are dedicated to climate change, sustainable energy and ICT. Five years on, members of these KICs have dreamt up 450 business ideas, initiated 75 start-ups and created 61 new products and services. Off the back of their success, EIT launched two more KICs at the end of 2014, with another three due to kick off by 2018.

TAKING EUROPEAN HEALTHCARE BY STORM

One of these two new KICs is EIT Health. It is one of the largest healthcare initiatives worldwide, with more than 140 partner organisations spanning key areas of healthcare including pharma, med tech, information and communication technologies, imaging and diagnostics, and consumer products. EIT Health also benefits from some of the world’s leading academic and research organisations, as well as payers, healthcare providers, and public authorities and municipalities. Together, these members will initiate innovation processes and support entrepreneurial activities that promote active ageing and healthy living or improve European healthcare systems, alongside the treatment and management of chronic diseases.

At the helm of EIT Health is interim CEO Dr Ursula Redeker. As a senior leader in pharmaceutical industry with more than 25 years of experience in both biotech companies and global corporations, and with more than 10 years in senior leadership roles, Redeker was an ideal choice to lift EIT Health off the ground. “I’m pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this initiative, as it is forward-thinking and has great potential,” she enthuses. “With a budget of €2 billion over the next decade, EIT Health will provide the best European talents with the best possible conditions to develop innovations that address important challenges in future healthcare imposed by demographic change and ageing societies.”

FROM IDEA TO COMMERCIALISATION

According to Redeker, a major problem facing Europe’s innovative efforts – not just in healthcare, but across the board – is the fact that only a fraction of the ideas actually reach the market. “A good product or idea only contributes about 10 per cent to a business’s success. The other 90 per cent lies in managing the idea until it is ready for the market,” she expands. “There are a number of items that play into effective idea management, including a start-up’s organisational framework and corresponding processes, mix of competencies and division of responsibilities.”

To this end, EIT Health has developed concrete principles for the management of its projects so that Europe will not only see great innovations but also successful companies. The first tool it uses to achieve this is EIT Health Projects, which provides assistance to multidisciplinary and collaborative projects that are solutions- or needs-driven. This tool is often paired with its second: the EIT Health
Accelerator programme, which offers a wide range of support and services for companies to accelerate their innovation processes, obtain access to research capacities and facilitate new market entries.

Finally, the organisation provides a range of short and intensive courses, full MSc and PhD programmes, and executive education through the EIT Health Campus. “Higher education is very important for us,” Redeker underscores. “Our training and education programmes are designed to be very market and application orientated, and they cover a wide variety of healthcare topics, current and future. We intend to bring more entrepreneurial thinking and knowhow into higher education.”

CLOSING THE GAP
A second major problem facing Europe’s innovation efforts is the region’s fragmented structure. From financial fragmentation due to different currencies and strongly diverging prices of items such as government bonds, to varying legal and political structures between countries in the European Economic Area, innovators looking to launch a product onto the market face a glut of obstacles. Additionally, each country has its own way of providing healthcare. “Europe has highly fragmented healthcare systems that could limit our innovation potential unless we strive for products or healthcare solutions that facilitate the integration of healthcare provision,” notes Redeker. “EIT Health will address this and bring together institutions from all over the region to form dynamic cross-border and cross-discipline partnerships.”

As such, EIT Health’s international headquarters will be based in Munich, Germany, and by autumn, it will have six national co-location centres in areas identified by the EU Innovation Scoreboard as ‘high innovation performers’: the UK, France, Sweden, Spain, Benelux and Germany. In addition to these co-location centres, EIT Health will also have six regional clusters in Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Wales. “This mix will enable us to leverage diversity from different regions across Europe and address its highly fragmented healthcare market,” Redeker surmises. “Through harmonised European standards and healthcare systems combined with product innovations and personalised healthcare, we can facilitate broad access and create excellent business opportunities at the same time.”

A HAPPY AND HEALTHY FUTURE
By the end of 2018, EIT Health aims to create 165 start-ups and support 160 new service and product solutions in its goal to overcome the challenges of demographic change and ageing societies, while also improving integration of healthcare services. “We believe these are ambitious, yet reachable goals for EIT Health,” enthuses Redeker.

With these products on the horizon, Morgan has thoughts on how Europeans – both individually and as a society – can support active ageing and promote healthy living now. “I think healthy ageing amounts to diet, exercise and, most importantly, social contact,” she shares. “Personally, I really do make an effort to eat healthily and to walk to places, and I am very fortunate to have a wonderful support network.”

Of course, not all elderly people in Europe have access to the kind of support that Morgan enjoys. Clearly, in the face of social isolation and variable quality of healthcare continent-wide investment in both health systems and innovations that promote active ageing is becoming increasingly important, making the work of EIT Health invaluable.

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