

Living with MS Conference

On World MS Day 2014 MS Ireland hosted a one day conference, Living with MS, in Cork. MS and Me blogger Declan Groeger was there to report on the day's sessions.

DR BRIAN SWEENEY, Consultant Neurologist Cork University Hospital, kicked off the day by bemoaning the fact that even if 12 more neurologists were appointed by the HSE the ratio would only be 1:100,000 and that would still be shy of what is needed. He spoke on the incidences of MS with Europe standing at 108:100,000 while North America has the unenviable figure of 140:100,000. I'm glad I'm European. He mentioned the signs and symptoms but sadly we are all too aware of those even though we all present differently. Thankfully we don't all have each sign and symptom. The average age at diagnosis is 30; more women than men have MS, there is an hereditary factor, albeit a small one; 97% of people with MS (PWMS) have no family history.

I have previously blogged on the need for PR training for those giving diagnoses and Dr Sweeney told us how the use of medical jargon is being discouraged in medical student training. Not quite PR training but it's a start. While commenting on the available treatments he said that MS is a marathon not a sprint. Treatments should be considered with the long-term plan in mind and he urged us not to look for 'instant gratification'. He warned of patients having too high an expectation of any drug but I think that we all know that the treatments currently available are not cures but hopefully are at least stabilisers. Dr Sweeney noted that the two aspects of MS that cause most concern to PWMS are walking and vision and, with that in mind, he said that Fampyra should be available without the needless worry of cost.

Dr Eric Downer, Department of Anatomy & Neuroscience, University College Cork, spoke on his Cannabinoids research – he started by noting that he was scientist, not a clinician, who rarely meets patients. Cannabinoids have been used in the treatment of tumours but what has achieved most notice over the last number of years is its use in the alleviation of spasticity and tremors in MS. Over the years cannabis has had bad press with its recognition as a psychoactive drug. Its components are readily absorbed into the system and thus give instant gratification. There are between 80 & 100 active components in cannabis but only two are of real interest, with THC being one. This psychoactive element of cannabis reaches a very high level in the body and stays active for a prolonged period after smoking but when ingested medically its peak is much lower and it remains in the system for a shorter period of time.

Prof Michael Hutchinson, Gabrielle O'Keefe, Dr Eric Downer, Dr Brian Sweeney, Ava Battles & Liz Hooley



Professor Michael Hutchinson, Consultant Neurologist, St Vincent's University Hospital (Dublin) and MS Ireland Medical Advisor, spoke on Vitamin D and its role in MS. He told us that research is ongoing but much more is needed as there is no universally agreed intake level and its presence, or lack thereof, does not completely explain the prevalence of MS in certain areas. Vitamin D is naturally available through sunlight and fatty fish but both are insufficient in Ireland. Prof Hutchinson recommended a daily supplement especially in the winter months but a discussion with your doctor should take place before starting any supplementation.

He gave some very interesting facts regarding Vitamin D

- Vitamin D deficiency may lead to increased susceptibility to MS
- The incidence of MS is higher in North East France than in South West France
- Immigration prior to the age of 15 causes the immigrant to acquire the MS risk of the recipient country and the converse is also true
- A 22 year study of US armed forces concluded that Vitamin D protects against MS
- MS activity tends to be seasonal, being more active in the spring, after winter, when our Vitamin D levels are depleted and very low activity is often seen in autumn/early winter when levels are raised after the summer sunshine
- High Vitamin D levels reduce the rate of brain atrophy in early MS

Authors note – take plenty of sun holidays, eat fatty fish and you'll be grand!

Declan Groeger is an accessibility activist raising awareness and bringing about change so that everyone, wheelchair users, people with different abilities, can live independent lives. He is also a member of the MS Ireland MS and Me Blog team.



See more from Declan at www.ms-society.ie.