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Health

Research vital to diabetes cure

Sheila O'Kelly

Conference: A major international conference on diabetes is under way in Athens this week as medical practitioners and scientists present and analyse hundreds of research studies on the condition.

More than 1,300 papers will be presented at the 41st annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD) in Athens which continues until Thursday. Around 12,000 scientists from all over the world will attend.

"Europe already has a strong research base, however, a concerted and accelerated European research effort is urgently needed to find new solutions for the effective prevention and treatment of this debilitating and life-threatening disease" said Dr Viktor Jorgens, EASD executive director.

"Such innovative research will not be possible without significant non-government support," he added.

About 194 million people are estimated to have diabetes, according to the International Diabetes Federation's most recent global figures.

"The anticipated global epidemic of diabetes will impose a great financial strain on the health economy of many countries as well as on the individual with diabetes, who will be affected in terms of quality of life due to the management of a complex disease and its complications," warned Prof Christian Berne of the Institute of Medicine at Uppsala University in Sweden.

Prof Berne is addressing the conference on "Building a national diabetes programme and strategy - the burden of diabetes."

He said that most people with diabetes were in developing countries. Most of the burden of diabetes was due to complications of the condition with cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of death. But retinopathy, nephropathy and neuropathy were also serious threats to the future health and quality of life of the person with diabetes, he said.

Recent European data showed that in coronary care units more than 50 per cent of the patients had diabetes or impaired glucose tolerance (IGT).

While diabetes was usually associated with insulin dependent type 1, (ie they must be given insulin artificially), 85-95 per cent of the total diabetes prevalence was due to type 2 diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes is associated with resistance to the insulin that the body produces. Sometimes the condition can be managed without administering insulin artificially.

Underlying the increased prevalence of type 2 diabetes were obesity and physical inactivity, which had evolved from social and cultural changes of recent years.

"Unhealthy lifestyle, urbanisation with crowded living conditions, social deprivation, stress and unemployment may also be important underlying causes," said Prof Berne.

He predicted that diabetes in pregnancy would affect an increasing number of women.

"The reported perinatal mortality is three-six times higher than in non-diabetic women, in part due to congenital malformations, the prevention of which requires meticulous planning," Prof Berne said.

He said public health services needed to focus on prevention to reduce the burden of diabetes on the individual and on society. "Recent large-scale trials have shown this to be possible," he said.

The EASD aims to support high quality research in Europe to find a cure for all types of diabetes and associated complications.

The annual meeting of the 5,000-strong association is held in a different country each year. Some 200,000 people in Ireland have been diagnosed with diabetes and it is estimated that at least 100,000 more have the disease but are unaware of it.

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