

Event Report: What can be done to support a healthy and productive European workforce and society?

On the 28 October 2021, the [Societal Impact of Pain \(SIP\) Platform](#) organised a virtual event on employment and pain policy entitled “What can be done to support a healthy and productive European workforce and society?” The event was co-hosted by MEP **Alex Agius Saliba** (S&D, Malta) and MEP **Radka Maxová** (S&D, Czech Republic).

This event built on the [SIP position paper on workplace integration and adaptation](#), highlighting the importance of a healthy and productive European workforce and society. The aim of this event was to identify gaps in employment policies for people living with disabilities and pain, and to provide recommendations for an effective integration and adaptation of the working environment, so these people can remain in, or return to work.

I. [Introduction](#)

Patrice Forget, Chair of SIP, and **Deirdre Ryan**, President of Pain Alliance Europe (PAE), opened the event welcoming the audience and panellists, and presented the SIP Position paper on workplace integration and adaptation, published in June 2021.

Jamie Wilkinson, SIP Project Manager, conducted a live employment and pain policy quiz.

II. [The impact of “good” work on health and wellbeing: mobilising the knowledge](#)

Prof. Kim Burton, Professor of Occupational Healthcare at the University of Huddersfield (UK), presented the state-of-play of people living with chronic pain and employment. Burton stated that people living with chronic pain struggle with work, whereas “good” working conditions could reduce the impact on this group. Burton added that work can have a very positive impact on health and wellbeing when it includes support, flexibility, appreciation, communication, and comfort for workers. Burton highlighted the principle of vocational rehabilitation as an approach to improve the effective integration of people living with chronic pain. For example, by offering an adapted workplace and work-focused healthcare.

Dr. Serena Bartys, Principal Research Fellow in Work and Health at the University of Huddersfield (UK) stated that the issue is complicated, as integrative care is difficult to achieve due to its cost and the multisystem approach. Bartys mentioned there is a need for a different kind of research in the field – implementation science and knowledge mobilisation to improve the uptake of evidence into policy and practice. This will help overcome the systemic barriers people with chronic pain are facing; Bartys mentioned a lack of a ‘whole-systems’ culture, and quoted the Green Paper published by the Department for Work & Pensions [Work, health and disability: Improving lives](#). Additionally, Bartys highlighted policy knowledge gaps around understanding the scientific evidence, and a lack of policy-relevant research including cost effectiveness data. Bartys stressed that the consequences of these obstacles are a lack of implementation, which results in limited empirical data and slow policy progress, no matter how good the evidence we provide is.

III. [The impact of pain on employment](#)

Deirdre Ryan, President of PAE, highlighted that the burden always falls on patients eventually, which makes them responsible to drive changes in this area. Pain has a huge daily impact on all areas, not only on work-life, and this is often overlooked. Ryan called for flexible working conditions, to take into

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The 'Societal Impact of Pain' (SIP) platform is a multi-stakeholder partnership led by the European Pain Federation EFIC and Pain Alliance Europe (PAE), which aims to raise awareness of pain and change pain policies. The scientific framework of the SIP platform is under the responsibility of EFIC and the strategic direction of the project is defined by both partners. The pharmaceutical companies Grünenthal GmbH and Pfizer are the main sponsors of the Societal Impact of Pain (SIP) platform

account the invisible consequences of chronic pain, and stressed the huge financial burden for poorly managed pain patients, who are often forced to leave their jobs and lose their income.

IV. Perspectives from MEPs

MEP Alex Agius Saliba (S&D, Malta), Co-chair of the European Alliance Brain, Mind and Pain, and Member of the European Parliament Intergroup on Disability, highlighted the importance of employment as a fundamental right for independent living, and for the positive impact it has on mental wellbeing. The two key elements to integrate people living with chronic pain are acceptance and flexibility. Saliba approved the SIP position paper and recognised that social inclusion and equal treatment policies could play an essential role. Saliba mentioned that there is an opportunity for the EU institutions to include specific provisions for people with disabilities and people living with chronic pain, and to provide them with relevant employment rights.

MEP Radka Maxová (S&D, Czech Republic), Co-chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Disability, and Co-chair of the Alliance for Mental Health, stated that more needs to be done for workers suffering chronic pain, as the European Union and its Member States are facing a new challenge with an ageing European population. Early diagnosis and workers' support are of the utmost importance to prevent the development of chronic pain, and consequences on workforce productivity. Maxová mentioned that the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 includes the need to ensure equal access to education and the labour market, including through the workplace adaptation for persons with disabilities. However, Maxová still called for workplaces to be more adaptable, and to address the stigma concerning people with disabilities. Maxová highlighted the economic benefits of developing these policies further.

V. Perspectives from Member States, Stakeholders, and the Commission

Nina Simenc, Counsellor for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal opportunities - Permanent Representation of the Republic of Slovenia to the EU, stated that the objective of the Presidency is to ensure sustainable work to everybody of working age. Simenc mentioned the concept of 'sustainable work over the life course' developed by Eurofound in 2015, which takes a work-life course approach to improve someone's job quality and availability for work. 'Quality jobs' require flexible working arrangements. Skilled and adequately paid work has been included in the draft Council Conclusions on Sustainable Employment. The Council is putting an emphasis on occupational health and safety, as this is a prerequisite for quality work over the life-course. During the recent Council meeting, European Ministers pointed out that more should be done for MSDs and psychosocial risks.

Robin Baltes, Social Attaché – Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU, mentioned the existing connection between workplace integration, occupational and safety health, and wellbeing in Germany. To achieve workplace integration, Baltes stressed the importance of supporting the EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities. Baltes mentioned that the Commission has set up a network to increase exchanges between Member States, national organisations, and relevant bodies. Finally, Baltes gave examples of policies implemented in Germany to improve employment among people with disabilities.

Jesus Alvarez, European Commission, DG EMPL C2 Health and Safety at Work, presented the EU Health and Safety Strategic Framework 2021-2027, and stressed the importance of this Framework to set three main cross-cutting objectives:

- Prevention
- Changing to adapt to the digital and green transitions and their challenges

- Preparedness for other potential future health threats

Alvarez added that the Commission is targeting a 'Vision-Zero' approach for work related deaths in the EU, with particular attention given to occupational cancer as the first cause of work-related deaths. The EC also promotes healthier lifestyles and workplaces for safety and health at work.

Sarah Copsey, Project Manager, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) stated that OSH has a key role in supporting individuals to remain in, or return to work. Safety can be achieved by adopting high standards of health and safety in workplaces in the first place, by adapting the work to the specific needs of each worker, by implementing accessibility measures, and by adopting employment equality regulations. Copsey emphasised the importance of early reporting and early intervention, as the sooner it is reported and acted upon, the easier it is to solve an issue. Copsey also stressed the need to secure understanding and open communication in the work environment, to offer a gradual return to work depending on each individual's needs, and that all workers benefit from addressing individual needs in the workplace.

Suzanne Kraatz, European Commission - DG EMPL D3 Disability and Inclusion, presented the new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Kraatz mentioned that the inactivity rate for people with disabilities and chronic diseases is 37.8%, and that about 50% of people living with chronic pain eventually leave the workforce. Kraatz reminded the audience that competence to legislate in this area falls into the hands of EU Member States, but stated that the Commission encourages the exchange of best practices to improve labour market access for people with disabilities in three areas:

- Strengthening employment
- Hiring perspectives (incentives and advice for employers)
- Prevention of disability, e.g., where chronic pain already existed

Kraatz also invited SIP to include employers in its next meeting on this topic.

Luk Zelderloo, Secretary General, European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), mentioned a project on supporting the relations between cancer-diagnosed people and their employers, to ensure a better and easier return to work. Zelderloo called for a more inclusive labour market, including everyone, as everyone can contribute. The focus should shift from people's disabilities to people's abilities, and specific and adapted support should be provided. Zelderloo introduced the 'STAR' recommendations developed by the EASPD, which focus on stakeholders, targeted actions, availability of support for the employee and the employer, and research to produce evidence-based policies.

Laura Marchetti, policy manager – Mental Health Europe, mentioned the importance of work in the recovery process of people affected by chronic pain. However, it implies both physical and mental adaptations of the workplace. Marchetti stressed the need for employment policies to also consider the psychosocial approach, and not only focus on social or economic aspects. There is a need for an integrated and tailored approach.

Michiel Reneman, SIP / PAIN Netherlands, supported vocational rehabilitation for people with chronic pain. Research shows strong evidence of success for a multimodal approach to health and wellbeing. Reneman stated that this approach provides positive benefits for society as it leads to better work outcomes, better quality of life, less absenteeism, and better economic outcomes for employers, employees, and for society.

VI. Breakout sessions - Recommendations

Session 1 - The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

The session on the **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** was chaired by Marisol Penalta, SIP Spain, and adopted the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Disseminate the social pillar and its action plan: Improve the way this information is shared and disseminated to all stakeholders (with social partners, HCPs, patients' organisations)
2. Ensure that this is implemented and followed at national level. Patient organisations can, and should play an important role here
3. Non-employees should not be overlooked here: Social protection, information, training for all who work, not only employees

Session 2 - The EU health and Safety Strategic Framework 2021-2027

The session on the **EU health and Safety Strategic Framework 2021-2027** was chaired by **Sarah Copey**, Project Manager at the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, and adopted the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Commission to promote a 'vision zero' approach to work-related deaths and injuries with MSDs affecting millions of workers in the EU
2. Considering long COVID in an inclusive manner, workforce-related data should be made available, and the importance of a multimodal approach should be highlighted
3. Ensure that the biological, psychological, and social factors of pain are comprehensively addressed in employment policies, by taking a vision zero approach to work-related injuries and exclusion from the workforce
4. National authorities, research organisations, and stakeholders should seize the opportunities offered at national levels, resulting from the implementation of the new EU-OSH strategy

Session 3 – The EU Strategy for the Rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030

The session on the **EU Strategy for the Rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030** was chaired by **Luk Zelderloo**, Secretary General at European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities, and adopted the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Recognise pain, pain disorders, or other 'invisible' conditions as disabilities, including in children
2. Ensure reasonable, flexible workplace accommodation for people with chronic pain, and general investment in accessibility
3. Tackle stigma by including chronic pain in educational programs. For example, understanding what chronic pain means for individuals, families, workers, policymakers, and employers

VII. Conclusions

Paul Cameron, Chair of the Advocacy Committee at EFIC, highlighted the lack of recognition and dissemination of pain policies at national and European levels, despite recommendations taken at higher levels. Cameron called all stakeholders to tackle the stigma on people with disabilities across Europe, and to consider the differences between countries to do so effectively.

Patrice Forget, Chair of SIP, called all stakeholders to disseminate the discussions, conclusions, and recommendations from this event across Europe. Forget stated that for a successful inclusion of people living with chronic pain, conditions at the workplace need to be adapted on a case-to-case basis, with different methods considered. Actions should be taken at all levels, from policy makers to employers. To ensure effective integration, the implementation of new policies should consequently follow a multimodal and inclusive approach.

Deirdre Ryan, President of Pain Alliance Europe (PAE), concluded the meeting by thanking the participants and inviting them to share and follow-up on the recommendations through their communications and social media channels, as well as through the National SIP Platforms. Ryan also encouraged stakeholders to use this network to support and share best practices in the future.

VIII. About SIP

The '[Societal Impact of Pain](#)' (SIP) platform is a multi-stakeholder partnership led by the [European Pain Federation](#) (EFIC) and [Pain Alliance Europe](#) (PAE). SIP aims to raise awareness of pain and to change pain policies. The platform provides opportunities for discussion for health care professionals, pain advocacy groups, politicians, healthcare insurance providers, representatives of health authorities, regulators, and budget holders.

IX. Contacts

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