

Speech by Prof. Rita Süßmuth

Currently in the Federal Republic of Germany, four to six million people suffer from osteoporosis – and this trend is increasing. Data from Prof. Felsenberg, Free University of Berlin, Germany, shows that two million women and one million men have to cope with vertebral fractures this was at any one time. Prof. Minne from the German Academy of the Osteological Sciences, Germany, shows that each year 130.000 hip fractures cause more than 25.000 women and men to die early – in comparison: road accidents in Germany cause less than a quarter of these deaths per annum. Furthermore, 25,000 osteoporosis patients with hip fractures become invalids requiring support, nursing care and often hospitalisation each year even though 75 percent of them lived completely independently before they broke their hip. This means that in Germany alone, we lose as many people as inhabit a small town in my constituency each year!

Unfortunately, as in many other countries our society is not yet aware of the significance of this disease. The public is not aware of the impact which osteoporosis has on the sufferer's quality of life. As with diabetes, high blood pressure and diseases of lipid metabolism many women and men do not know they are at risk until late complications become obvious and many physicians still do not recognise that a suddenly occurring fracture results from osteoporosis. But even worse: In Germany diagnosis and treatment are only reimbursed after the first fracture has occurred. Our task is to teach the public about risk factors for osteoporosis and preventive strategies to avoid this crippling disease and to make sure that sufferers are diagnosed and treated before the first fracture occurs.

Addressing this problem was impossible during my years as Health Minister in the late eighties since the disease was invisible. Sufficient data for the prevalence of osteoporosis were not available then and diagnostic and therapeutic measures were far removed from the evidence-based standards set nowadays. Things have changed dramatically since then. Thanks to the "Report on Osteoporosis in the European Community – Action for Prevention" from 1998 we know about this ticking time bomb. The consequences are that: We have to act very quickly because problems are worsening much more rapidly than we thought. Most recently, the 2001 Audit of the European Community Report shows that the incidence of hip fractures has increased by 25 percent already within four years.

Since we now have diagnostic tools and highly effective treatments to help fight osteoporosis, we need to confront decision-makers at different levels in our countries and enlist their help. We need to explain the latest epidemiological data as well as our strategies for prevention and cost-effective help for osteoporosis sufferers in order to speed up the process of achieving permanent changes in policy.

I am convinced we are going to win the battle. A lot of dedicated people are in place to help us:

"The Bone and Joint Decade", is a ten year initiative which aims to improve health policy for osteoporosis and other bone diseases. The German network of "The Bone and Joint Decade" has selected osteoporosis as the first bone disease to be addressed in my country due to the dramatic data that exists.

The International Osteoporosis Foundation provides a broad platform, not only for internationally first-class scientists from all related disciplines to meet voluntarily in order to exchange data and develop common strategies against osteoporosis, but also for patient societies and other non governmental organisations from all over the world with the aim of raising awareness and educating individuals about osteoporosis.

They bring ideas for educational campaigns to this platform. For example, in my country the German Green Cross (DGK) developed the concept of the exhibition "Osteoporosis – a photographic vision by Oliviero Toscani" and to which Mr. Toscani devoted his art free of charge. This project visualises the tremendous problems of the sufferers, thus creating public awareness in a totally new way. I am sure that these pictures help alert everybody responsible for health policy of the need to implement the necessary changes in health care.

As patron of the German Green Cross' "National Initiative against Osteoporosis" I support this Roundtable's "Call to Action". I am about to start action groups with my colleagues at the German Parliament and at a Federal level to promote diagnosis and treatment options for those at risk of osteoporosis prior to first fractures. With our activities we are able to contribute to the world-wide effort against osteoporosis.

To conclude:

- 1.: Osteoporosis is a severe, chronic, progressive disease that causes horrible pain and disabilities in our ageing population.
- 2.: Fortunately we have measures to prevent osteoporosis and to prevent fractures.
- 3.: What we have to do now is to work together to implement cost-effective policies to prevent fractures caused by osteoporosis