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Press release

## **Quality of life and the elderly: A long and active life free of chronic diseases**

**L'Aquila, 24 August 2015** – The elderly and chronic illnesses, how to maintain an active life and prevent disabilities. **This will be the main topic of the International Symposium entitled “Aging and Chronic Diseases”**, to be held in L'Aquila from 3 to 5 September. The symposium, which is being organised by the Geriatric Division of the University of L'Aquila and the Institute of Neuroscience of the National Research Council of Padua, is promoted by the Fondazione Internazionale Menarini. This event, which has received the prestigious endorsement of the European Union Geriatric Medicine Society – EUGMS – will see participation by national, American and European experts who will address topics of great significance in geriatrics: cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, dementia, diabetes, erectile dysfunction and nutritional disorders.

“Ten percent of the world population is over the age of sixty and life expectancy is becoming increasingly longer. These results have been achieved thanks also to medicine which has found effective treatments against acute events, such as infarction and stroke, with a rise in the survival of those affected. In many cases diseases which previously were mortal, are now kept under control, especially cardiovascular diseases. The negative consequence, however, is the increase in chronic diseases: today just on eighty percent of people over sixty have some sort of chronic disease and fifty percent of these also have two”, explains **Giovambattista Desideri, Director of the Geriatric Division of the University of L'Aquila** and co-chairman of the symposium. A long active life, in which disabilities and the need for healthcare are avoided, can be attained with appropriate management of chronic diseases in therapeutic terms and also concerning a correct life style with regard to nutrition, alcohol consumption, smoking and physical exercise. In addition to personal commitment, the management of the elderly must also, and above all, involve the health systems.

“According to the United Nations statistics, the European population of over sixty-year-olds which was 75 million in 1950, is now approximately 166 million, and this is expected to reach just on 242 million in 2050”, adds **Stefania Maggi, Scientific Manager of the Aging Project - Institute of Neuroscience of the National Research Council of Padua** and co-chairman of the symposium. “The report on

aging, recently published by the United Nations, indicates that Europeans over the age of sixty total 22%, double the percentage that is found in the rest of the world; 1 out of 5, equal to over 33 million people, are over 80 and the United Nations estimates a growth in the over-eighty age group of up to 68 million by 2050. It is therefore evident that in Europe there is the need to support and promote the concept of specialised healthcare for the elderly”, continues Maggi.

**Among the disorders on the rise in the elderly population, the experts meeting in L’Aquila will be discussing hyperuricaemia, that is, the excessive presence of uric acid in the blood.**

In some countries, such as the United States, epidemiological data indicate a prevalence of hyperuricaemia equal to 21 percent.

The causes of this significant increase are mainly due to the following:

- Changes in dietary habits;
- The epidemic spread of obesity;
- An increase in life expectancy;
- The administration of low doses of diuretics and aspirin which reduce the elimination of uric acid in the urine;
- An higher incidence of diseases that favour the accumulation of uric acid, such as kidney failure;
- A increase in the survival from diseases related to gout, especially, ischaemic heart disease.

The most well-known consequence of hyperuricaemia is gout. Even though in the collective imagination gout is often perceived as a disease of the past, in actual fact it is still very widespread today:

- It affects 1-2% of the adult population in industrialised countries;
- It is estimated that just on one million people in Italy suffer from gout;
- It is the most common inflammatory joint disorder in men and post-menopause women.

“Besides the widely known link between high levels of uric acid and gout in the serum, **more and more evidence suggest that hyperuricaemia may give rise to the onset of cardiovascular, kidney and metabolic dysfunctions, including hypertension, the metabolic syndrome and diabetes**”, warns Desideri. “More specifically, an analysis of data relating to 5926 American participants in the National Health and Nutrition Survey has shed light on a direct association between the increased levels of uric acid and cardiovascular mortality. For each additional mg/dL of uric acid in the serum concentration, the cardiovascular mortality rises by 9 percent in men and 26 percent in women. During the same study population it was found that in women with uricaemia exceeding 7 mg/dL, death from ischaemic heart disease was five-fold that of women with levels of uric acid below 4 mg/dL. In addition, a correlation was observed between gout and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and mortality, consequently special attention is recommended in monitoring the normal uricaemia values ( $\leq 6.0$  mg/dl) and cardiovascular risk factors in patients suffering from gout, as they are 2 times more likely to suffer from coronary disease than patients without gout”, continues Desideri.

The aging process in humans is not associated with cardiovascular diseases alone.

**Among the various conditions characterising the elderly, the experts meeting in L’Aquila will also be discussing the decrease in immune functions** and the rise in the concurrence of various diseases. “When combined with environmental factors, these phenomena can give rise to an increase in the risk and severity of infectious diseases”, explains Maggi. “Diseases in the elderly adult tend to be more serious and have a greater impact on health factors such as morbidity, disability,

quality of life and mortality. While some of the most common infections like flu and pneumococcal infections can now be prevented with the administration of vaccines, awareness and use of these prevention strategies is scarce. The increased prevalence of infectious diseases in the elderly must not be underestimated, as they tend to be more serious in this population and have a greater impact on health factors such as morbidity, disability, quality of life and mortality. For example, pneumonia and flu are the fourth most frequent cause of death in subjects over the age of 65, and death from pneumonia occurs twice as often in elderly adults compared to young adults”, concludes Maggi.

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