



Annual Report 2014

Promoting health
through effective research
in individuals with
rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases

Our mission

FOREUM is dedicated to promote research in rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) as an independent research funding body in rheumatology.

To achieve this goal, FOREUM seeks to raise funds from various donors. Basic and applied research of highest quality will be supported to reduce the burden of disease for people with RMDs.

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Preface

Dear colleagues and friends,

We are pleased to offer you the first Annual Report of the FOREUM Foundation for Research in Rheumatology. From its fledgling status some 24 months ago, the foundation has gone a remarkable way from launch stage to actually making things happen. International in its core and aspiration, FOREUM has been fortunate to bring together a group of dedicated experts spread around Europe to form a functioning entity.

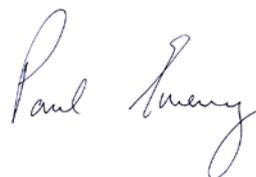
What we have already achieved in this rather short period of time has only been possible thanks to our corporate donors and their enthusiasm for the idea of creating an independent, transnational foundation for rheumatology research in Europe, and especially to their generous financial support. We consider this support as a sign of trust in the value of FOREUM funded research for the advancement of the field and for society, but we also take it as a mandate to live up to our high ambition in terms of the quality of research that FOREUM supports.

We would like to conclude this first editorial with a word of thanks – first of all to our donors current and future, then to EULAR for its continued support in the important building phase of our foundation, and not the least to all our committee members, staff and others who are contributing to making FOREUM a successful and respected entity in European rheumatology research.

Respectfully,



Prof. Josef S. Smolen,
President, Board of Trustees



Prof. Paul Emery,
Chairman, Executive Committee

A brief story of FOREUM

In early 2011, the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) engaged in strategic reflections about future funding of rheumatology research in Europe and how EULAR could further contribute to fostering research beyond what it was already doing in this field. On 4 September 2011, the EULAR Steering Group discussed an initial position paper, developed by a small task force, which was subsequently presented to the EULAR Executive Committee where it was very positively received and supported for action.

The paper reiterated some key facts: rheumatic diseases place a substantial burden on the health of the European population, and there remain significant unmet clinical needs across the range of diseases contained within the discipline. Likely such burden can be substantially reduced by results of outstanding research into the causes, prevention and treatment of these diseases. The pharmaceutical industry, for its part, is increasingly seeking interaction with the academic community in order to optimize pathway selection, pre-clinical modeling, proof of concept clinical trials and progression towards stratified and precision medicine based approaches.

EULAR's conclusion of these reflections was that the creation of an independent European funding institution for rheumatology research could indeed confer advantages in several domains that need widespread collaboration to achieve this goal. Approval was given to the task force to sketch a model for an independent, broadly funded foundation. Some 18 months later the new foundation was ready to start operations.

In the summer of 2013, at the EULAR Congress in Madrid, the establishment of the "European Rheumatology Research Foundation ERRF" was announced. Provided with an initial capital from EULAR, the new foundation immediately started its mission by issuing a call for research proposals on the topic of Osteoarthritis. Funding of two major projects and pump prime funding of two others was the successful outcome of this first initiative.

While the foundation had made its initial public appearance, the Board recognized the need for a more distinct name for the new-born foundation that would create a strong identity from a more global perspective. The designation "FOREUM Foundation for Research in Rheumatology" was found to best serve that purpose; it was officially registered in June 2014 as the brand and global identity of the foundation. With this, FOREUM will not only support rheumatology research in Europe, it will also constitute a *forum* for deliberations on the future *rheumatology* research arena by virtue of the discussions of its committees on future research calls.

Our principles and objectives

FOREUM is devoted to promote research in rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) as an independent research funding body in rheumatology. It seeks to initiate research of the highest quality oriented towards a broad range of RMDs. This research should be based on collaboration between excellent centres from several countries. Only peer-reviewed research proposals that fulfil these ambitions are considered for funding.

To fulfil this goal, FOREUM seeks to raise funds from interested commercial and non-commercial donors that share its vision and goals: recognizing that research and innovation in this field are crucial for improving both the prevention and the management of RMDs and, hence, the living, working and socio-economic conditions of the more than 120 million people in Europe variously afflicted by RMDs.

FOREUM will define its strategic goals and operations independently from other bodies. Nevertheless, the intention is that it will coordinate its research activities with EULAR, the European League Against Rheumatism as its initiator, in order to avoid unnecessary overlap or otherwise inefficient deployment of precious research resources.

When developing its research strategy and grant agenda, FOREUM is therefore interested in engaging with and learning from various stakeholders, including centres of excellence in rheumatology research and other stakeholders active in rheumatology research.

Our vision for rheumatology research

FOREUM defines the scope of its intended research as well as specific research funding activities on some fundamental beliefs and developments:

- The challenges facing modern medicine can be best addressed by means of an integrated, collaborative approach. The application of modern molecular and cellular technologies, health care related information technologies and databases should form the basis for paradigm shifting advances in the short to medium term.
- Rheumatology should be at the forefront in applying such approaches. This in turn will render the discipline attractive to external funders, to top quality basic researchers, and critically to attracting the brightest young minds.
- Significant networks of investigators have formed in Europe in recent years, including academic (basic and clinical investigators) and industrial participants. Autocure (FP6), Masterswitch (FP7) and most recently BTCure (IMI 5 & 6), EURO-TEAM (FP7) and PRECISEADS (FP7) attracted substantial EU funding and in turn have generated outstanding capacity, networking capability, large, well-characterized bio-banks and world-leading technical 'know-how'. Moreover they have been productive in terms of research output at an internationally competitive level.

Thus the European rheumatology community has amply demonstrated its capacity to work together to the 'greater good'. There is now, however, a need for a sustainable funding model(s) to maintain this enterprise. And FOREUM is all set to be a committed and dedicated partner.

Our research funding in 2014

Equipped with starting capital donated by EULAR, FOREUM was able to issue a first call for research proposals in the area of Osteoarthritis in the autumn of 2013. 46 letters of intent from around Europe were received and have been peer reviewed and assessed in early 2014. As a result of the thorough evaluation process by the FOREUM Scientific Committee, four projects were finally selected for funding. Major consideration was given to the theme of the call and to the wider needs of the community in the area of Osteoarthritis research.

Research grants

These are the first two winners of a FOREUM research grant of € 300,000 each:

Prof. Rik Lories et al, Belgium, for their project: **Pro-resolving mediators in osteoarthritis: homeostatic signals in the joint organ?**

Osteoarthritis (OA) is characterized by a progressive loss of tissue homeostasis leading to structural damage in the whole joint. Inflammation is a key component of OA in a large number of patients and a clear therapeutic target. The applicants hypothesize that inflammation in OA is sustained by a lack of pro-resolving molecules. The characterization of poly-unsaturated fatty acid metabolites as specialized pro-resolving mediators (SPM) has opened new directions for research. The applicants' preliminary data suggest that some SPM are present in the synovial fluid. They aim to further understand their roles in OA using a systematic approach to document their presence in OA patients and their effects on key processes involved in joint development, homeostasis and disease. Analysis of these SPMs requires specialized techniques available in the consortium. The team proposes an integrated collaboration building on the expertise and facilities of the different groups and capitalizing on the group's access to OA patient materials. The project will run over three years.

Prof. Floris Lafeber et al, Netherlands, for their project: **Intrinsic regeneration of osteoarthritic cartilage by unloading involves peri-articular stem cell activity: a joint effort**

“Spontaneous” cartilage repair is recognized in animal models, and more recently impressive proof of concept for “spontaneous” cartilage repair following joint distraction in man has been furnished. It is likely that joint fluid and nearby resident stem cells are key to this hitherto poorly understood biological process. The collaborative group will delineate the unknown mechanisms by which mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) in the context of the intra-articular milieu are involved in this repair activity and how their role can be optimized. The group is pursuing a paradigm that an understanding of “in vivo intrinsic MSC” biology can be used to develop novel cost effective OA therapy strategies. The project aims to unravel the still unknown mechanisms that lead to cartilage repair (as observed in response to joint distraction) and reveal the mechanisms by which MSCs are involved in this repair activity and how their role can be optimized. Acquiring this knowledge will cross new frontiers to establish actual treatment of a still incurable joint disease. The project will run over three years.

Pump prime funding

In addition to these two full project grants, FOREUM awarded two research projects with pump prime funding of € 75,000 each supporting their corporate planning and preparation of a competitive application to the EU Horizon 2020 research programme:

- **Dr. Ingrid Meulenbelt et al**, Netherlands, and her team working on **Micro RNAs as biomarkers in OA**.
- **Prof. Philip Conaghan et al**, United Kingdom, and his team working on **OsteoArthritis definition through imaging and tissue biomarkers (PEARL-OA)**.

FOREUM would like to congratulate these research teams for their convincing applications and wishes them successful outcomes of their research projects or applications to the EU Horizon 2020 research programme.

Our next calls for research proposals

Thanks to the financial status of FOREUM and the already committed donations for the coming years, FOREUM will be able to issue further calls for research proposals in the coming months and fund successful projects. Three topics for future calls have been identified based on topic suggestions received from various sources. These were ranked and evaluated by the FOREUM Scientific Committee, which made a final topic recommendation to the FOREUM Executive Committee and Board of Trustees.

The next calls for proposals are scheduled as follows:

- **A call on Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE)** was launched in November 2014. SLE affects people across the European population. The SLE burden in terms of individuals and health economies remains significant in the absence of sufficient highly effective therapeutics, predictive biomarkers and optimized treatment strategies.
- **A call on Spondyloarthropathies (SpA)** will be launched end of June 2015. SpA comprise a group of common inflammatory arthropathies, consisting of a spectrum of inflammatory diseases that affect primarily the peripheral joints and spine but can also involve skin, gut and eyes. As such SpA can mediate a substantial impact on those affected. The current treatments and assessment tools that we have to aid therapeutics are inadequate, there are few studies that inform the best strategy for treatment, no effective biomarkers exist to stratify treatment and the health economic and personal impact of these diseases is imperfectly understood. This call will address many of these issues.

- **A call on Registries** will follow end of 2015. With the advent of powerful targeted therapies in the last decade in rheumatology practice we have seen substantial improvements in outcomes for people with RMDs. However, these medicines mediate effects on the immune system, and as such may be associated with adverse events. In response, the European rheumatology community created a variety of registries to collect information about the outcome for those people starting biologic medicines. There is now a large data resource contained in these registries which can inform the progress of disease, economic impacts therein and the general and drug-specific safety of the medicines, now being widely used. The challenge of the next decade is to integrate, harmonize and harness the extraordinary information contained in these registries to inform the next generation of treatments and strategies, and to build confidence in the economic case for their broad exposure in the European area.

Based on currently available assets and prudent financial planning, the total amount of funding for each call will be in the area of € 1,000,000 with a maximum grant of € 300,000 for successful individual projects.

More calls for proposals and funding of projects will mainly depend on the financial capabilities of the foundation as well as on the quality of the research proposals received.

Our donors

Despite the short time since its establishment, FOREUM has received confirmation of financial support from various donors. The FOREUM leadership has the pleasure to express gratitude to the following supporters:

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