EDITORIAL

GA²LEN: COORDINATED RESEARCH

Because of the growing increase in allergic disease, there are fears that within 10-15 years half the European population could have at least one allergy, especially those affecting the respiratory apparatus. Hence the need to increase preventive measures, which undoubtedly requires deeper knowledge of allergic disease, the influence of familial predisposition and the role of various environmental factors, both in the onset and progression of the disease (environmental irritants) and in conferring possible protection against them (infections, contact with animals). Treatment of all diseases is based on knowledge of their etiopathogenesis, thus progress in this area is fundamental to the development of new drugs and therapeutic measures, as illustrated by advances in the treatment of allergic disease over recent decades.

Allergic disease is being investigated by many researchers, covering a broad range of topics from epidemiology and etiopathogenesis to treatment, although the studies are sometimes repetitive, not always conclusive and their utility is debatable. If the distinct results reported by similar studies had been compared, more definitive conclusions might have been reached, bearing in mind the possible variants in the methods used or the conditions in which the studies were performed[1]. Hence the advisability of coordinated research, which could avoid repetition among studies or research of dubious utility.

Against this background, within the European Academy of Allergology and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) (Prof. Paul Van Cauwenberge) and in collaboration with the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Associations (EFA) (Prof. Ulrich Wahn), a patients' organization, a Network of Excellence has recently been set up. In commemoration of Galenus, who first described the relationship between the nose and the lungs, this network has been given the acronym GA²LEN to designate the Global Allergy and Asthma European Network[2,3]. The aim is to work together to coordinate studies of various aspects of allergic disease, especially rhinitis and asthma. The European Research Area (ERA), in which this working group is included, denotes interest in the integration of the member countries of the European Union in a common research project, as a model of what a true union of states should be.

Studies of the prevalence of rhinitis and asthma in various countries warn of the possibility that several phenomena may be of influence, to a greater or lesser extent, in distinct geographical areas or social groups, whether because of climate or other environmental

factors, habitat, genetic predisposition, or socioeconomic circumstances[4-6], although it should not be forgotten that prevalence studies may sometimes use debatable diagnostic criteria[7]. The main reason for investigating these phenomena is to try to prevent allergic disease, with the aim of avoiding the above-mentioned high prevalence rates that are forecasted in the not-too-distant future.

To this end, several working groups have been established, which will investigate the influence of: a) *nutrition and diet;* b) *infection: environmental exposure (the hygiene hypothesis, among other possible variables);* c) *indoor and outdoor environment;* d) *occupational exposures in workers and nonindustrial indoor environment;* e) *gender: sex differences in lung physiology and sex hormones;* f) *IgE sensitization and allergic diseases: better understanding of the genetic, molecular and cellular mechanisms;* g) *remodeling and asthma severity;* h) *clinical care: treatment in primary care centers and quality criteria for the organization of new pan-European clinical trials;* i) *genetics.*

It is envisaged that these working groups will be made up of researchers from 24 centers in 17 countries and that investigators from other parts of the EU will be able to participate. This initiative should be congratulated. The promoters hope that the first valid results will be obtained within five years, which, due to the obvious enthusiasm among participants, will undoubtedly be achieved.

F. Muñoz-López

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