

Autoimmune Specialists, Researchers, and Patient Advocates Meet at United Nations

On September 24, 2010, The United Nations' NGO Health Committee in partnership with the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association (AARDA) hosted *The Global State of Autoimmunity Today* at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York City. The event was attended by autoimmune medical specialists, researchers, patient advocacy organizations, and actress Kellie Martin – the National Spokesperson for AARDA.

The mission of the NGO Health Committee is to increase the knowledge of delegates who come to the UN through side events that provide information about various health issues both nationally and globally. These meetings communicate the importance of research, advocacy, and advancement of treatment for diseases affecting patients around the globe.

Virginia T. Ladd, President/Executive Director AARDA reported that autoimmune diseases are growing throughout the world and that the organization is currently working on an International Autoimmune Network in hopes of affecting policies that will benefit research and treatment of patients with autoimmune diseases.

Betty Diamond, M.D., Center Director, Department of Autoimmune Diseases, The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, Manhasset, NY, suggested that the consequences of autoimmune diseases are both biological and socio-economic. The biological effects on patients can cause organ failure such as heart disease, while the socio-economic effects are a result of lost work and poor performance by patients. This disrupts both families and corporate productivity and can prove extremely costly for the country as a whole. Approximately \$100 billion in annual healthcare costs is spent on autoimmune diseases in the US and approximately \$7.3 billion worldwide.

In order to effectively fight autoimmune diseases, Diamond feels we need to effectively train health care workers to easily recognize autoimmune diseases, educate the public, conduct more research on non-toxic and non-costly treatments, and create more worldwide clinical trials.

Noel R. Rose, M.D., Ph.D., Director, Johns Hopkins Center for Autoimmune Disease Research, Baltimore, MD, and Chairman Emeritus AARDA Scientific Advisory Board reported on the Environmental Triggers of Autoimmunity. He discussed the significance of an individual's inherited genetic predisposition and its role in the development of autoimmune disease when combined with hormones and certain environmental factors that can trigger more than 80 known autoimmune diseases.

There are several known environmental triggers: drugs, bacteria, viruses, foods, pollutants, hormones, stress, and tobacco smoke. It's believed that early exposure to certain triggers will be carried through life and can cause an individual to develop an autoimmune disease later in life. Dr. Rose conveyed the need for long periods of study with large samples of patients to effectively research diseases in order to determine effective treatments and cures.

Actress Kellie Martin (*Life Goes On*, *E.R.*, and *The Jensen Project*) is the National Spokesperson for AARDA. Martin lost her sister Heather, at age 19, to a misdiagnosed case of Lupus and spoke about her sister's courageous battle for her life and the importance of knowing your "AQ", which stands for Autoimmune Quotient. The AQ consists of several simple points that all individuals should know and record about their own health in order to receive an accurate diagnosis:

- Know your family medical history and give a copy to your doctor

- Keep a *detailed* list of your symptoms and when you have them (many symptoms come and go, are non-consistent, or happen infrequently in autoimmune diseases)
- Get the opinions of more than one doctor if you feel your health concerns are not being addressed
- Educate yourself
- Learn more information about determining your AQ; visit: <http://www.aarda.org/videos.php>

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