

TILDA presents to European Union Parliament, hosted by Emer Costello MEP

On 2 October 2013, TILDA was invited by Emer Costello MEP to present the study and its findings to the EU Parliament.

The seminar, entitled “Living happier and healthier in the age of longevity: how longitudinal studies on ageing inform policy for Healthy Life Years. Insights from TILDA”, focussed on how TILDA is characterising the older citizen and exploring the ageing process and the determinants of successful ageing in order to plan appropriate health, social and economic policies. Such policies are essential for development of an environment for ageing well.

TILDA’s founder and Principal Investigator, Professor Rose Anne Kenny presented the seminar with Trinity collaborators Professors Ian Robertson, Fiona Newell, Richard Reilly, Charles Normand and Alan Barrett and AbbVie General Manager Mr Ryan Quigley.

TILDA charts all aspects of health, economic and social circumstances of over 8,500 people aged 50 years and over, living in Ireland and is one of the most comprehensive research studies of its kind both in Europe and internationally. The study is led by Trinity College Dublin in collaboration with a number of institutions in Ireland and longitudinal studies on ageing in Europe and the US.

MEP Emer Costello opened the seminar by welcoming speakers and participants from academia, private sector and policy makers, including Heinz K. Becker MEP (Austria) of the Employment and Social Affairs committee and Phil Prendergast MEP (Ireland) of Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection. MEP Costello outlined the policy context in which the seminar took place, noting that Europe’s ageing population is a significant health and economic challenge for Europe – as well as an opportunity, and drew attention to the role of research not only in developing medical treatment for particular diseases but also in providing a factual evidence basis to inform the work of policymakers. She pointed to the European Commission’s identification of ageing as a key challenge for the EU and described the engagement of the EU on this topic, highlighting that healthy ageing, demographics and well-being constitutes a key societal challenge in the next EU financial framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon 2020.

Professor Rose Anne Kenny explained that the world’s rapidly ageing population is one of the greatest challenges of our time, noting that the first person to live to 150 years old may have already been born. She went on to explain that people are longer living because of better health care, healthier behaviours, better environments and more prosperity, but that people age differently with some susceptible to physical and cognitive vulnerability and others resilient, and that there is a huge discrepancy in life expectancy in different countries and in how many years of health after the age of 65 – that is healthy life years, which is very much a focus of European policy. Professor Kenny then described how TILDA, by generating evidence-based research, represents a step-change in terms of data, knowledge and understanding of ageing to unravel the factors that underlie physical, psychological and socioeconomic determinants of healthy ageing and healthy life years. She noted that “TILDA will provide a valuable input to policymakers in EU in helping formulate evidence based policies. As the EU prepares to launch Horizon 2020 it will be important to have long-term perspectives contributing to the policy debate around future health care.”

Insights presented from TILDA included:

- Life gets better as we age: Quality of Life continues to improve after age 50 and peaks between the ages of 65 and 75. At 83 years of age Quality of Life is equivalent to that at 50 years.

- The societal contribution of older people: supporting their parents, children and grandchildren in both care and money contributions, and engagement in social activities such as volunteering.
- Life-course: adverse childhood events significantly influence health status in later life.
- Untreated treatable diseases: simple health monitoring can identify undiagnosed health issues. For example, Atrial Fibrillation, an irregular heartbeat, is undiagnosed in over 40% of people aged 50 in the TILDA study and over and is a risk factor for stroke and heart attacks.
- Longer working lives: working is good for your brain. Peer groups in the work place matter a lot and may be more influential than the state in determining when a person retires. Working, education, and social engagement enhance cognitive function and protect against dementia and Alzheimer's disease.
- Technologies and intervention studies: TILDA is developing and testing a range of new technologies including mobile technologies for health screening and technologies for falls prevention. Information from TILDA is used to develop further studies to test interventions in different cohorts.

Mr Ryan Quigley, commercial General Manager at Abbvie Ireland described the need in the corporate sector for evidence-based research for sustainable healthcare, and added that the longitudinal nature of TILDA not only informs policy but also enables tracking of the impact of policy change and the effectiveness of healthcare interventions.

MEP Heinz Becker commented that TILDA is "best practice" and the "benchmark" for how to conduct a longitudinal study on ageing. He noted that investing in a longitudinal study is essential as "the investment now pays back in the future" as the long term benefits are unquestionable and reduces future cost to the state. MEP Becker indicated his interest in working with MEP Emer Costello in support of TILDA and spoke of the benefits of having MEPs from other countries and parties on board.

MEP Costello concluded the seminar by congratulating TILDA on a fascinating seminar commenting "the transfer of innovation and learning from each other is what the EU is about and TILDA is already informing policymakers at national and EU level." MEP Costello pledged to support the agenda of longitudinal research through her work on the European Parliament Committee for Employment and Social Affairs.

On 3rd of October TILDA held a number of one to one meetings with a number of EU officials including MEP Heinz Becker, Cabinet Geoghegan-Quinn Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs and Directorate General for Health and Consumers.

TILDA is invited to return to the EU Parliament in 2015 to run a showcase workshop for the EU Parliament and the EU Commission.