



## ERA-CVD: NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

ERA-CVD stands for ERA-NET on cardiovascular diseases, a new kid on the block of European Research Area (ERA) Networks under the European H2020 umbrella. ERA-NETs were launched already in FP6 with the goal to launch joint transnational calls for research proposals in various areas. By contributing to improve the coherence and coordination across Europe of such research funding programmes in the Health sector now seven ERA-NETs are existing.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) among the non-communicable diseases cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are the major cause of death in Europe, claiming more than 4 million people per year in the 53 member states of the WHO European Region and around 2 million in the EU (European Cardiovascular Disease Statistics 2012). CVD are a group of diseases that affect structure and function of heart and blood vessels, including stroke. Recent data indicate that up to 80% of all healthcare expenditure in Europe is allocated to chronic diseases, with cardiovascular diseases alone being estimated to cost the EU economy more than 196 billion € every year. The burden of CVD for the EU society and economy, as well as the ambitions for an



Figure 1. The team at DLR-PT; coordination office of ERA-CVD. Cosima Pfenninger, Wolfgang Ballensiefen, Isabella Napoli, Hella Lichtenberg.

“Innovation Union” guaranteeing improved lives and a better society for EU citizens, call for the development and implementation of innovative treatment and technology. Cardiovascular disease is caused by disorders of the heart and blood vessels, and includes coronary heart disease (heart attacks), cerebrovascular disease (stroke), raised blood pressure (hypertension), peripheral artery disease, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease and heart failure. Most cardiovascular diseases can be prevented by addressing behavioural risk factors.

**ERA-CVD** is a newly established European Research Area Network comprising 23 partners from 18 countries/regions that has been granted for funding through the current EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation ‘Horizon 2020’. It will run from October 2015 to September 2020. Funding transnational collaborative and multidisciplinary Research and Technology Development (RTD) projects on cardiovascular research is one of the main aims of ERA-CVD. ERA-CVD ([www.era-cvd.de](http://www.era-cvd.de)) started in October 2015 with the preparation of the first joint transnational call (JTC) which was published in January 2016. All 23 partners of ERA-CVD participate in this JTC that focuses on ‘Heart Failure’ and together with

the EU contribution around 16 Mio. Otherwise € is available for transnational research consortia. The coordinator of this network, Dr. Wolfgang Ballensiefen explains the enthusiasm and drive of ERA-CVD.

**Dr. Ballensiefen what were your expectations when you first thought about building an ERA-NET on cardiovascular diseases?**

Cardiovascular diseases are a heavy burden for patients, their families and society as a whole. Research into this area is therefore a priority in the funding portfolio of the German Ministry of Education and Research, BMBF. And – research is global. Based on the existing and long-stand-

ing experiences within other ERA Nets and in the area we strived for the solidification of cooperations with other countries. Furthermore in the last years only very few funding calls of the EC did focus on CVD research. The expectation was then to coordinate the implementation of common funding programmes in the area of cardiovascular diseases in a European network of funding organisations. On top of the existing national programmes we anticipated that greater scientific efforts could be stimulated by interdisciplinary and international cooperation on the level of research groups. Particularly flexible research funding instruments for small consortia were identified as most effective.

### What is necessary to bring 23 organisations together?

The increasing societal and economic burden of cardiovascular diseases is a global and not merely a European challenge. It is not only necessary to increase our understanding of the causes of CVD, but also, development of new innovative medicinal products and improvement in medical technology will require scientific excellence and the creation of new knowledge as drivers of future growth and prosperity. All our 23 ERA-CVD partners share the view of the importance and chances of internationally coordinated funding in this area and acknowledge the added value of bundled capacities. This common interest in a societal most relevant question is a strong motivation to jointly promote research funding. In addition, the nationally rather well developed scientific communities called out for such flexible research funding possibilities that include pragmatic and transparent procedures. All the partners represent leading organisations that fund, manage and implement strategically planned focused research programmes in the field of health. All implement and fund international collaborative research programmes (e.g. bi-lateral, multi-lateral) and participate in numerous European and international initiatives that match their national strategic issues on research. The combination of their expertise in one consortium is a major strength of ERA-CVD. And, on the personal dimension, matters that count substantially are trust and mutual understanding, reliability and, not least, a curious and enthusiastic common spirit.

### In retrospective, what can be seen as challenges in the establishment of a network of funding bodies?

The coordination of programmes requires joint concepts, standards, and agreement about cross cutting issues of programmatic and strategic importance. The highly diverse funding procedures in the participating funding organisations are being harmonized for the JTCs within ERA-CVD. In the preparatory phase of ERA-CVD information was collected on the contents of existing and, where possible, future national funding programmes and research priorities. Thematic or strategic framework conditions for programme development were explored. It is very important to understand and respect each other's national priorities and needs and try to find a common ground for joint research support. In retrospective, these initial steps were rather quickly done and we were able to start our most important network activities right away with the launch of the first joint transnational call in January 2016.

### What are the main highlight(s) in ERA-CVD?

The most prominent highlight is of course the implementation of the first JTC 2016 for research proposals on 'Heart Failure', already three months after the start of the ERA-NET, with an assigned budget of about 16 million €. High quality research is based on novel ideas from outstanding scientists, innovative research programs and the efficient allocation of resources. To address the challenge posed by the complexity of cardiovascular diseases, in terms of prevention, treatment and care, it is essential that the leading scientific expertise across all relevant research fields is empowered to work together under a coherent programme of activities. The current JTC 2016 with EU co-funding will be followed by several non-co-funded JTCs in the upcoming four years.

ERA-CVD comprises 23 Ministries and funding organisations from 18 countries across Europe, Israel, Taiwan, Turkey and Norway. The goal of ERA-CVD is to create a European Research Area in which cardiovascular research is conducted and funded across countries, allowing research groups to jointly work on specific challenges, exchange ideas, and benefit from cross border expertise.

Furthermore, ERA-CVD cooperates with the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and the European Heart Network (EHN). The ERA-CVD consortium will take steps to become visible in the cardiovascular research community as a new collaboration, e.g. via its own dissemination strategy as well as via collaborating with important stakeholders such as the ESC and EHN. Altogether, ERA-CVD aims at implementing a transnational and efficient funding programme in line with the European strategy for international cooperation in research and innovation resulting in funding of excellent scientific projects with increased benefit to patients. Moreover, the exchange and collaboration with European Research Infrastructures, e.g. the ESFRI-initiatives is intended in order to set up an efficient European framework for innovative transnational research on CVD and international collaborations.

Another planned highlight will be the support for young scientists in the fields of CVD research. ERA-CVD plans to launch an "Excellent Paper" Award to recognize the most remarkable and outstanding scientific publications by young researchers.

**Dr. Wolfgang Ballensiefen** is the coordinator of the ERA-NET ERA-CVD (<http://www.era-cvd.eu/254.php>) at the Health Research Project Management Agency Part of the German Aerospace Center (DLR PT) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), Germany.

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