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[WATCH] Maltese school children will be screened for coeliac disease

A joint project between Maltese and Italian researchers will be screening 20,000 children across Malta with a simple pinprick procedure in a bid to identify coeliacs early on



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by **David Hudson**



Coeliac disease is a common disorder caused by an adverse reaction to gluten found in wheat, barley and rye

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A project between Malta and Sicily is underway to identify coeliac children early on before invasive procedures are required. The recognition technology will involve a finger-prick test much like a blood sugar-level check.

Coeliac disease, one of the most common genetic disorders, affects about 2% of the world's population and 90% of the cases remain undiagnosed and consequently untreated, Dennis Vella Baldacchino said.

Vella Baldacchino is the chief medical officer within the Department for Policy in Health. He was speaking at a press conference in Valletta, inaugurating Itama (Italy-Malta) Project.

The project is part of the Interreg Italia-Malta fund, a cross-border programme between Malta and Sicily that hopes to reinforce sustainable growth, foster innovation and competitiveness and protect the environment.

"The procedure is already practised in various parts of Palermo. It's important Malta becomes part of this technology since undiagnosed coeliac disease can cause irreversible damage to the lining of the bowels in children," Vella Baldacchino said.

What is coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is a common digestive condition where the small intestine becomes inflamed and unable to absorb nutrients. It can cause a range of symptoms including diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating. It is caused by an adverse reaction to gluten, a dietary protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Gluten is found in any food that contains these cereals, including pasta, breakfast cereals, most types of bread, certain types of sauces and most beers.

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"Besides the finger-prick procedure, children will be handed a questionnaire at schools that would help us identify whether they are coeliacs. It is after diagnosis that more invasive procedures are taken. We hope that parents fully approve of this technology via the consent form we'll be handing out for the benefit of their children," Vella Baldacchino said.

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The project has been granted permission by the ethics board and all schools are highly encouraged to participate for the benefit of their own students.



Aaron Farrugia, Parliamentary Secretary for EU funds and Social Dialogue. (Photo: James Bianchi/MediaToday)

The programme is expected to run during 2019 and will focus on children aged four to twelve years attending all schools in Malta and Gozo, whether state, church or independent. All participation costs are covered by the project.

Parliamentary Secretary for EU funds, Aaron Farrugia said during the press conference that besides the Itama project, some 15 projects were being followed between Malta and Sicily, pilot projects which will eventually feed into national policy. "These projects grant opportunities to share best practice between Malta and Sicily and they amount to some €10 million," he said.



Evarist Bartolo, Minister for Education. (Photo: James Bianchi/MediaToday)

Education Minister Evarist Bartolo, speaking in Italian for the benefit of the Sicilians in the audience, said the project will bring the worlds of education and health together. "It's apt that it does so since our children and our students can only make the most out of their education if they are in good health. Most children can't benefit from a good education due to health issues."



David Hudson is a staff reporter

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