

€2 million ITAMA project for research on coeliac condition among children

By **News Malta** - January 30, 2019



The project ITAMA (ICT Tools for the diagnosis of Autoimmune disease in the Mediterranean Area) financed by the INTERREG V-A Italia-Malta programme worth over €2 million aims to optimize the diagnostic methods for coeliac conditions has been launched by the Minister for Education and Employment Evarist Bartolo and Parliamentary Secretary for European Funds and Social Dialogue Aaron Farrugia.

During the conference local educators were given information about coeliac condition, the symptoms that might indicate its existence and the process to be followed for the testing in schools. The project team highlighted the importance of such screening, especially for children who are affected by the condition and are not aware of it.

Being diagnosed and receiving the necessary treatment at an early stage will improve the children's way of life and prevent further damage caused by the intake of gluten. Previous studies in Sicily shows that between 1% and 2% of the population in Sicily is coeliac, which is a significant incidence.

The project of ITAMA will be running along 2019 and over 20,000 children aged 4 to 12 years from schools in Malta and Sicily will be part of a screening exercise by an innovative method of

non-invasive tests. These tests will rely on the consent of parents or guardians.

Also, this project aims to improve the diagnostic process with the support of ICT tools and define tools to transfer knowledge.

Minister for Education and Employment Evarist Bartolo stated that this is a very interesting project by means of screening children for coeliac conditions and a great collaboration between the two countries – Malta and Italy – leading to a successful research which in turn determine any diagnosed pupils from an early age to treat imminently.

Parliamentary Secretary for European Funds and Social Dialogue Aaron Farrugia said that the ITAMA project is one of 15 projects funded by the Interreg Italia Malta Programme 2014-2020. This programme, Farrugia said, is important as it makes part of the national policy and contributes to the sharing of best practices between regions.

The Parliamentary Secretary said that the projects currently being financed under Italia-Malta amount to a total of €10 million. These are significant due to the common challenges faced by the Mediterranean, and deal with issues which are very relevant to Malta. “In a recent meeting I had with President of Sicily Nello Musumeci, we decided to work towards closer cooperation between Malta and Sicily, for the benefit of our citizens,” Farrugia said.

The project coordinator Profs Giuseppe Raso said that “The scientific community agrees on the necessity to improve the diagnostic methods for autoimmune diseases and on the importance of involving ICT to obtain this goal. Particularly for coeliac conditions, we need to find less invasive and less expensive methods that can identify the condition at an early stage in children of paediatric age.”

ITAMA is an interdisciplinary project financed by the INTERREG V-A Italia-Malta programme. The project is under the lead of the Department of Physics and Chemistry – University of Palermo. Other project partners are the University of Messina, Mater Dei Hospital – Malta, the Malta Ministry for Health and a Maltese private company AcrossLimits. Furthermore, the Regional Health Department of Sicily and the “Buccheri La Ferla” Hospital of Palermo will collaborate on the project.

Original article found on [The Malta Independent](#)



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