Reuma.pt – the start and the purpose

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Thanks to the advent of biotechnological drugs, the start of the new millennium heralded a new page of the history of Rheumatology in general, and particularly of Rheumatology in Portugal. This group of new therapies established the possibility of offering rheumatic patients a new chance to get a better therapeutic approach to their diseases, with better clinical control of the progression of the disease, and hence bringing a substantial reduction in its impact, not only for the individual patient but also the social and economic consequences on society, in general.

However, it was soon realised that these were pharmaceutical products with highly specific usage and recommendations (hence, as now, reserved for a niche comprising patients with more serious and quicker-progressing illnesses, and those who have shown resistance to successive classic therapeutic approaches), with precise criteria for prescription and use, and strict requirements to guaranteed safety, with high economic costs. All these aspects have instilled, among Rheumatologists, and right from the beginning, the concept of demand for regulation with the resulting clinical and economic advantages.

In this regard, Rheumatology was unique and also a pioneer (a situation which probably lingers on to this day...) on anticipating authorities by creating a set of rules and requirements for self-regulation, which allowed a clinical practice based on good standards, and also the accumulation of information about its use, which could characterize and substantiate it (and, unfortunately, in this matter we keep pioneers and still unique…).

For this reason, the first standards or Consensuses regarding use of biotechnological drugs for treatment of Rheumatoid Arthritis were established (2003). For this very same reason, the Board of the Portuguese Society of Rheumatology, as elected for the term of office running from 2006 to 2008, defined, from the very outset, that its main programme goal would be the priority implementation of a database of patients with Rheumatoid Arthritis to be subjected to therapy with biotechnological drugs, later known as BioRePortAR, unveiled to the public on 12 January 2008.

In just over a year, with the full initial support from Abbott Laboratories, and through a partnership with the Institute of Preventive Medicine of the School of Medicine of Lisbon (operating out of premises that this institution kindly loaned to us), a team comprising two senior computer technicians (Jorge Ventura and Fernando Martins), one computer coordinator and Web specialist (João Tendim), one epidemiologist (Paulo Nicola) and three rheumatologists (João Eurico Fonseca, Helena Canhão and Augusto Faustino) started to materialize a dream that has since become reality, and which then developed into the present-day Reuma.Pt.

The main goals of the BioRePortAR were the following:

- Assure the correct use of the medication (with strict criteria for the introduction and maintenance thereof as part of treatment, and the requirement for security monitoring);
- Standardise and centralise the appraisals and the usage records, bringing the field of Rheumatology together, around one core goal and a coherent and grounded clinical practice;
- Supply data (clinical data, date regarding safety of the drugs, global costs, and social and economic repercussion).

The data records of SPR, ever since its establishment with BioRePortAR (at that time just a true database), through to the current Reuma.Pt, which is a clinical process in the true sense of the word, have always been an instrument used by SPR and by the field of Rheumatology to make a clinical and scientific distinction, thereby promoting a correct and standardised use of these drugs, while also, at the same time, taking possession of a strong instrument of clinical appraisal and investigation.

Right from the beginning, it was our intention to collaborate and liaise with the Health Authorities (Ministry for Health, General Health Department and

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INFARMED), to make this work instrument available for widespread use by all those who prescribe biotechnological drugs, to ensure the property of each and every medical prescription (prescription certificate) and thus the rationality and cost effectiveness thereof, instead of the option that has unfortunately been adopted: that of certifying offices and prescribers, without any return or feedback in terms of demonstration of the suiting of the prescription. Unfortunately (and inexplicably!...) and, despite the hundreds of hours spent by all SPR elements involved in this project, from 2008 up to the present day, this has never materialised… with clear harm to the public treasury, but more importantly with damage to all the rheumatic patients who, in desperate need for this therapeutical option, could have been prevented from such treatment…

To us, Rheumatologists, remains the Pride for this work, and also for what it represents in terms of the unequivocal affirmation of the clinical and scientific quality of our specialty, the Challenge of continuing to seek the excellence of our practice; and the Hope that our efforts in the demand for self-regulation may, one day, be transversally applied to all the players who are involved in the field of the prescription of biotechnological drugs!

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