Strengthening Plastic Surgery in Europe – ESPRAS Survey at ESPRAS European Leadership Forum (ELF)

Authors
Riccardo E. Giunta1*, Nicholas Moellhoff1*, Horacio Costa2, Cenk Demirdöver3, Giovanni di Benedetto4, Anna Elander5, Mark Henley6, Dylan J. Murray7, Dirk J. Schaefer8, Stephan Spendel9, Olavi Vasar10, Rado Zic11

Institutes
1 Abteilung für Hand-, Plastische und Ästhetische Chirurgie, Klinikum der Universität München, LMU München, Deutschland
2 Aveiro University Plastic Reconstructive Craniofacial Hand and Microsurgical Unit, Gaia Hospital Center, Portugal
3 Department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery and Hand Surgery, Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir, Turkey
4 Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Marche Polytechnic University, Ancona, Italy
5 Department of Plastic Surgery, Institute of Clinical Sciences, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
6 Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Nottingham University Hospitals, United Kingdom
7 National Paediatric Craniofacial Center, Children’s Hospital Ireland, Dublin, Ireland
8 Department of Plastic, Reconstructive, Aesthetic & Hand Surgery, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland
9 Division of Plastic, Aesthetic and Reconstructive Surgery, Department of Surgery, Medical University of Graz, Austria
10 Hospital of Reconstructive Surgery, Tallin, Estonia
11 University Hospital Dubrava, Department of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery, School of Medicine University of Zagreb, Croatia

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Correspondence Address
Univ.-Prof. Dr. med. Riccardo E. Giunta
Abteilung für Hand-, Plastische- und Ästhetische Chirurgie, Klinikum der Universität München, LMU München
Pettenkoferstr. 8a, 80336 Munich
Germany
Phone: +4989440052697
Fax: +4989440054401
Email: r.giunta@med.uni-muenchen.de

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
Hintergrund Das Exekutivkomitee (ExCo) der ESPRAS hat im Oktober 2020 das erste ESPRAS European Leadership Forum (ELF) initiiert, um den internationalen Austausch zwischen den verschiedenen nationalen plastisch-chirurgischen Gesellschaften zu fördern und eine Plattform für die Bewältigung gemeinsamer Herausforderungen bereitzustellen. Das vorgelegte Manuskript präsentiert die wichtigsten Ergebnisse und Schlussfolgerungen dieses Treffens.


Ergebnisse Die Durchführung ästhetischer Eingriffe durch Ärzte ohne Facharztausbildung in der Plastischen Chirurgie, sowie das Brustimplantat-assoziierte anaplastische großzellige Lymphom (BIA-ALCL) wurden als die wichtigsten internationalen Herausforderungen der Plastischen Chirurgie erkannt, für deren Bewältigung auf europäischer Ebene ein standardisiertes Vorgehen diskutiert wurde. Weiterhin wurden aktuelle
Introduction

The European Society of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery (ESPRAS), founded in 1967, is the umbrella organization of all European plastic-surgical national societies. Its aim and purpose is to promote the field of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery in Europe. Thereby, it supports education, training and research, encourages the exchange of knowledge and ideas between Plastic Surgeons in European countries, facilitates cooperation between national member societies and promotes ethical behavior in all aspects of practice, education and research [1]. Each member of a member national society for Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery in Europe is a member of ESPRAS, thus it currently includes over 7000 members.

The need for strong European partnerships within national societies has recently become most evident: In times of crisis, international cooperation is key and harmonization of efforts to overcome common issues, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, is indispensable. In this regard, ESPRAS conducted a European Survey and organized, together with the European Association of societies of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (EASAPS), a webinar on considerations of getting back to work in Plastic Surgery with the COVID-19 pandemic, based on international standards and European consensus [2,3].

To facilitate further international exchange and to provide a platform for international leaders and delegates of the national societies of Plastic Surgery to discuss common challenges, the Executive Committee (ExCo) of ESPRAS organized a first ESPRAS European Leadership Forum (ELF). The aim was to identify challenges for national societies and share solutions on a European level in a further ESPRAS European Survey.

Materials and Methods

Members of the executive (presidents, vice-presidents, secretary generals) and national delegates of Plastic Surgery national societies discussed hot topics in Plastic Surgery via the Zoom virtual conferencing system (Zoom Video Communications, Inc.). Attending participants responded to a virtual question & answer session with questions being displayed throughout the webinar.

Results

The challenges associated with Aesthetic Surgery performed by doctors who are not board-certified Plastic Surgeons and Breast Implant-Associated Anaplastic Large Cell Lymphoma (BIA-ALCL) were perceived as major hot topics within most national societies. Both topics were discussed vividly. Education in plastic surgery and a European fellowship program for young Plastic Surgeons was favored by a large majority of participants. The implementation of European registries for free flaps, implants and for breast reconstruction were supported by the majority of respondents.

Conclusion

The ESPRAS ELF provides a platform to propel international exchange and alliance, communication, education, research and future projects. A further virtual webinar with the topic “Strategies for Strengthening and Defending Plastic Surgery against Others” was suggested to be conducted in spring 2021.

Fig. 1 ESPRAS European Leadership Forum with participating national societies from all over Europe.
non-member countries were welcome, in order to be transparent and open for all partners. Due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the associated restrictions, the European Leadership Forum, which was originally planned to be held in Munich, Germany, was organized virtually. Hot topics with the clear need of European harmonization were identified and discussed, including an online international question & answer session which was held via the Zoom virtual conferencing system (Zoom Video Communications, Inc.). Attending participants from all over Europe were asked to answer questions that were displayed throughout the webinar. The meeting was recorded, and the Zoom Recording is available in the restricted member area of the ESPRAS website (www.espras.org).

Results

52 participants (presidents, vice-presidents, secretary generals and delegates) from over 30 European countries (Fig. 1, Table 1) joined the virtual ESPRAS European Leadership Forum and responded to the poll.

Most European national societies of plastic surgery have less than 300 members, but more than 100 members (35%; 9/27). More than half of all national societies have 300 or less members (56%; 15/27). One European national society reported less than 1500, but more than 1000 members (4%; 1/27) and one society reported more than 1500 members (4%; 1/27) (Fig. 2).

A total of 37 participants responded to the second poll inquiring about the five hottest topics in Plastic Surgery in the partici-
pants national societies (▶Fig. 3). Two topics were ranked highest, both reaching 68 % (25/37) of all participants votes: The challenges associated with Breast Implant-Associated Anaplastic Large Cell Lymphoma (BIA-ALCL) and Aesthetic Surgery performed by doctors who are not board-certified Plastic Surgeons, were perceived as major hot topics within most national societies, requiring streamlined European consensus. 62 % (23/37) of the respondents found the implementation of breast implant registries to be of significant importance, followed by education (57 %; 21/37), the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (51 %; 19/37), social media regulations and code of conduct (43 %; 16/37), the strengthening of academic plastic surgery (32 %; 12/37) and fat grafting and stem cell regulations (27 %; 10/37). New European regulations for medical products and commerce instead of medicine in Plastic Surgery ranked last, both receiving 14 % (5/37) of participants votes.

A total of 34 participants responded to a poll determining the need for joint ESPRAS projects (▶Fig. 4). An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with the implementation or continuation of strong European educational programs for young Plastic Surgeons. 97 % of all participants responded that education and European international exchange should be strengthened by ESPRAS and voted in favor of an ESPRAS fellowship program that offers scholarships to young Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons by sponsoring them to visit centers of excellence in Europe.

In terms of registries, 79 % (27/34) of respondents found that ESPRAS should build European registries for specific issues such as free flaps, breast reconstruction, or breast implants. The need for detailed ESPRAS European surveys on topics such as breast surgery, breast reconstruction and other professional issues was supported by 97 % (33/34) of all respondents.

Importantly, 85 % (29/34) of all respondents were interested in taking an active role in ESPRAS projects.

A total of 39 participants responded to questions regarding organizational issues of the newly introduced format of the ESPRAS ELF (▶Fig. 5). 95 % (37/39) of all respondents found that regular ESPRAS ELF would be helpful for their national societies. 49 % of all respondents saw the need for annual meetings, while 46 % would even prefer meetings twice a year. Hereby, the majority of participants (77 %; 30/39) propose that future meetings should be organized both virtual and in person.

Over 90 % (28/31) of all respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the activity of their national society and the plastic surgery care in their country (▶Fig. 6). In May 2020, ESPRAS analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Plastic Surgery in Europe [2] and, together with EASAPS, provided recommendations on getting back to work [3]. Over 55 % (17/31) of all respondents reported reading the manuscripts, and finding the considerations and recommendations helpful for clinical practice and the practice of other colleagues in their country.

Discussion

The ExCo of ESPRAS initiated a virtual European Leadership Forum (ELF) to provide a platform for international discussion of a diverse set of topics relevant for societies of Plastic Surgery all across Europe. ESPRAS is the umbrella society to all member European National Plastic Surgery societies. As such, it is uniquely positioned
to coordinate a response to the common issues that affect plastic surgeons throughout Europe.

This paper summarizes the results and the discussion of the first ELF based on poll questions that were displayed throughout the webinar. Most participants stated that Aesthetic Surgery performed by doctors who are not board-certified Plastic Surgeons and BIA-ALCL are major hot topics within their individual national societies. BIA-ALCL, classified as a lymphatic neoplasm by the World Health Organization in 2016, is a malignant disease that has been associated with textured breast implants and has led to a great level of uncertainty in both patients and the public [4-10]. As Plastic Surgeons, it is our duty to understand this rare disease, to recognize it at an early stage and help those affected. As the use of textured implants is preferred in Europe, there is a definite need for clear recommendations for action and harmonization of approaches on a European level.

Fig. 4 Poll 3 ESPRAS Projects; European Education, Registries and Surveys. Bar graph showing respondents answer in % for respective questions.
Non-certified Plastic Surgeons pose a major threat to our profession. Being a Plastic Surgeon requires specialized training, surgery practiced at the highest standards with patient safety at its core. Many nations, however, allow doctors to perform plastic surgical procedures without being accredited by a national board of Plastic Surgery. Our profession is ultimately discredited, if complications occur by procedures performed by unqualified practitioners. This is especially true for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. The majority of respondents thus see this as a major threat across all national societies, requiring also a strong European standpoint.

Specific ideas were presented and discussed with regard to education in Plastic Surgery and a European fellowship program was
favored by a large majority of participants. The young generation of plastic surgeons was represented by PLASTA (UK plastic surgery trainee association) who encouraged international cooperation between young plastic surgeons across Europe to further advance the field of Plastic Surgery and build strong ties for the future.

The implementation of European registries for free flaps, implants for breast reconstruction were discussed vividly. A great need for high quality international data in these areas was recognized. Details with regard to international data protection laws, database management and maintenance on European level have to be elaborated in further meetings. The drive for change was highly visible, with over 85 % of participants willing to play an active role in ESPRAS projects and in pushing ideas forward. As a first step, international detailed ESPRAS European surveys on topics such as breast surgery, breast reconstruction and other professional issues, also supported by over 95 % of all respondents, will be designed, in order to establish European standard operating procedures.

The impact and importance of joint international efforts in tackling common issues that affect all national plastic surgical societies became visible, as over 50 % of all participants reported to have profited from ESPRAS European guidelines and recommendations of getting back to work in Plastic Surgery during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic [2,3].

Currently, there exist several European societies for Plastic Surgery (Table 2). While all follow the aim of strengthening European Plastic Surgery, they are either focused on special topics or issues of Plastic Surgery or restrictive in membership. A presentation on unifying European Plastic Surgery societies and the debate that followed showed that there is a clear need to coordinate all efforts to gain more visibility and drive forward common issues of Plastic Surgery. Greater cooperation between European societies (Table 2) is currently being explored.

As a next step, delegates of aforementioned European societies are invited to join ESPRAS 2022 congress in Gaia/Porto in Portugal, where options for stronger collaboration between European societies will be discussed, hopefully in person. The goal is to unite all European societies and develop a continental power to protect and strengthen our specialty. Furthermore, due to the great and positive response of all participants, of which 95 % found that regular ESPRAS ELFs would be helpful for their national societies, a further virtual webinar with the topic “Strategies for strengthening and defending the specialty of plastic surgery” has been proposed for the spring of 2021.

Limitations of this study lie within the study design, being an electronically disseminated questionnaire distributed only to the participating executive and delegates of national societies of plastic surgery who had received an invitation to join the webinar. Thus, responses are not without bias. Potentially only surgeons with a particular interest in the matter of the respective topics completed the questionnaire. Further, sample size is an issue, which is why large European questionnaires are necessary to validate the findings of this study in the future. The next ESPRAS Survey will focus on breast reconstruction. A questionnaire is being prepared.

Conclusions

Close co-operations throughout societies of Plastic Surgery in Europe strengthen our specialty, sharpen our profile and increase our visibility and influence within the medical profession. The virtues of strong European partnerships are evident, and the ESPRAS European Leadership Forum (ELF) provides the exact platform to propel international exchange and alliance, communication, education, research and future projects.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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