

CHARCOT FOUNDATION

A public interest foundation

1. WHAT IS MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS?

Multiple sclerosis is an autoimmune disease in which the body's own immune system causes damage to tissues in the central nervous system – particularly the sheath that insulates nerve fibres – thus causing motor and sensory disorders that may result in a physical handicap. The pathological mechanisms involved are numerous and complex, which explains why existing treatments of the disease are only partially effective.

2. WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN BELGIUM?

The incidence of multiple sclerosis is unevenly distributed in the world. Belgium unfortunately forms part of a high-risk region. Close to 15,000 people are affected by the disease in our country. Belgian researchers were among the first to study the causes of multiple sclerosis and to improve diagnostic techniques while at the same time developing new treatments.

3. WHAT IS THE CHARCOT FOUNDATION?

The Charcot Foundation, named after the first neurologist to describe the disease, was founded in 1987 within the “Groupe Belge d'Etude de la Sclérose en Plaques” (GBESP – Belgian Multiple Sclerosis Study Group). The GBESP, a non-profit-making organisation, was itself set up in 1957 in order to raise awareness among Belgian neurologists about the importance of multiple sclerosis and to promote the fundamental and clinical research necessary to combat the progression of the disease.

4. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CHARCOT FOUNDATION?

The Charcot Foundation exclusively supports fundamental and clinical research aimed at treating the disease. The foundation's assets, built over several decades in accordance with its mission and goals, enable the foundation to provide substantial grants to Belgian researchers every year. In 2001, the Charcot Foundation was officially recognised as a public interest foundation.

5. HOW DOES THE CHARCOT FOUNDATION FUNCTION?

Once a year, the foundation's Scientific Committee, composed of neurology professors from all the Belgian universities, selects the research projects to be subsidised. On the advice of the Management Committee, the Board establishes an annual amount of funds earmarked for such projects.

6. WHERE DO THE FUNDS COME FROM?

Since its creation, the Charcot Foundation has relied on the help of the world of culture and of numerous volunteers who generously share their talents and time with us. The Foundation also relies on the support of official institutions and private companies and regularly receives gifts and bequeathments that contribute to its overall fund. Gathering these resources, which are essential to research, is one of the principal aims and concerns of the Charcot Foundation. In order to fulfil this aim, a number of fund-raising projects are currently under way.

7. WHO RECEIVES GRANTS FROM THE FOUNDATION?

Belgian researchers whose projects have been selected and who are required to report regularly to the Belgian Neurology Society on the progress of their research. These fundamental and clinical research projects are also extensively reported in international scientific publications. The results of the projects sponsored by the Charcot Foundation are thus made available to researchers around the world and contribute to building synergies in this important area of medical research.

8. WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATUS OF RESEARCH ON MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS?

Multiple sclerosis is a highly complex illness whose mechanisms are not entirely understood, which is why fundamental research is required. For some years now, doctors have been able to prescribe drugs that can partially inhibit the progress of the disease. Further research in this field is essential to develop increasingly effective treatments.

9. WHAT PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE?

At present two classes of medicines are available. The first class consists of drugs that are well-tolerated by patients but not very effective. The association of several drugs (polytherapy) to obtain better results is already the subject of clinical studies.

Drugs of the second class are highly effective but their use is limited by long-term toxicity. New medicines – potentially just as effective but less toxic – are being researched.

10. WHAT HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

Researchers from all over the world meet several times a year to report on the progress of their work. By funding their activities, the Charcot Foundation provides Belgian researchers with an opportunity to share their expertise, benefit from that of their colleagues abroad and join forces with the international scientific community in the fight against the disease.

The future of research depends on teamwork and cooperation between everyone involved, based on the very real hope that new discoveries can be made for the benefit of all the women and men affected by multiple sclerosis.