

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

Commissioner Borg delivers an opening speech at the European Patients' Forum 10th Anniversary Conference

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Tonio BORG, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, participates at the European Patients' Forum Conference "Towards active patient participation in healthcare"

Dublin, Ireland, 23 May 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you today, and I would like to begin by congratulating the European Patients' Forum on your tenth anniversary.

In ten years, patient organisations such as yours have become increasingly involved in the making of EU health policy, and rightly so. I regard it as a priority.

You have a critical and valuable role to play in advising policy makers and contributing to action to improve the health of European citizens; and this is why the Commission is pleased to support patients' organisations with operating grants under the EU-Health Programme.

Today's conference comes in the context of the European Month of the Brain, a month dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of brain-related research and healthcare; and I see that you will be discussing later today patients' advocacy for neurological services.

Some 165 million Europeans are likely to experience some form of brain-related disease during their lifetime.

As the population ages, the incidence of brain related diseases is likely to increase. Finding ways of preventing and treating them is therefore urgent.

You have taken important action in this regard. I was impressed by the European Federation of Neurological Associations' pledge to support investment in neuroscience research and to protect the interests of neurology patients.

Let me share with you some EU level action in this area, starting with research.

Since 2007, the EU Seventh Framework Programme for Research invested about 2 billion euros to support brain research. This includes 280 million euros for research on neuropsychiatric disorders alone.

Such research provides the scientific evidence base needed to develop effective approaches for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of brain-related diseases.

The need to generate new knowledge and innovation in brain research led the Commission to indeed declare May 2013 the 'European Month of the Brain'.

Our action will not stop here. There will be opportunities for brain research in all the three proposed pillars of Horizon 2020: 'Excellent science', 'Industrial leadership' and 'Societal Challenges'.

Let me also mention the Joint Action for "Alzheimer Cooperative Valuation in Europe," set up in 2010.

Earlier this year, the Joint Action delivered concrete recommendations on issues such as the early diagnosis of dementia and ways to deal with related psychological problems.

I am confident that the outcomes of this collaboration will have a positive influence on medical practice in this field and on the lives of the over six million citizens living with dementia.

Another example is the European Partnership for Action Against Cancer, which brings together national cancer leagues and other dedicated partners to fight cancer. Its aim is to help reduce the incidence of cancer by 15% by 2020.

More in general, tackling the massive challenge of chronic diseases is only possible by working together with invaluable input from patients' organisations.

I am pleased that the European Patients' Forum was among the many organisations to put forward its views in the context of the chronic disease reflection process.

Another important area for EU action is in stimulating medical development and innovation.

Clinical trials, for example, are an indispensable part of research to develop and improve medicinal products. Yet the number of trials conducted in the EU has decreased by over 25% in the last 5 years. Reversing this trend is one of the objectives of the Commission's proposals for a new clinical trials regulation.

The proposals aim at maintaining the highest possible level of patient protection, while facilitating multinational trials, which are essential, for example, to develop treatments for rare diseases or to develop personalised medicines. Patients have an essential role to play in this.

Equally, patients are increasingly able to actively manage their own disease and treatment options.

The Directive on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, which is due to be transposed by EU countries by 25 October this year, is clear proof of this. It represents a landmark in EU health policy as the first major piece of EU legislation on health services.

The Directive clarifies patients' rights to choose treatment in another EU country. It also demands greater transparency – for example on quality and safety standards – from health systems and providers across the EU.

We will monitor the transposition of the Directive in each EU country very closely to ensure patients get the maximum benefit.

I encourage you to provide us with your views and experiences on the application of the Directive. These will be invaluable in helping us to ensure patient rights are respected.

We will also look at ways to share best practice – something I know the Patients' Forum is already very active in – in implementing the Directive across the EU.

Another important element linked to both choice and empowerment is patient safety.

In Europe today there are some worrying statistics: every year, between 5% and 10% of hospital patients contract a healthcare associated infection.

At 5%, this means these infections kill 37 000 people in the European Union every year. The hospital cost alone can be estimated at over €5.4 billion every year.

EU Health Ministers agreed on a number of actions in 2009 to increase patient safety including reducing the number of healthcare associated infections.

Member states have made encouraging progress on patient safety, as shown by the Commission's report of last November. However, more efforts are needed, in particular in education and training of health workers; and here I am currently considering a permanent EU network on patient safety.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The initiatives I have touched on, are all areas where the EU has seen a significant shift in thinking in the last 10 years. Last week we celebrated European Patients' Rights Day highlighting the benefits the EU brings to patients.

Today I have spoken of some of these: empowerment, choice, flexibility and active patient management, all ideas that place the patient at the centre of health policy and at the start of healthcare.

Organisations such as yours have played – and will continue to play – an essential role in promoting and representing patients and giving them a strong voice at EU level.

I wish a fruitful and productive conference.

Thank you.