



OPEN LETTER

Mr Frans Timmermans, European Commission First Vice-President

Mr Vytenis Andriukaitis, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

Mr Jyrki Katainen, European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment & Competitiveness

Brussels, 08 July 2016

Dear First-Vice President Timmermans,
Dear Commissioner Andriukaitis,
Dear Vice-President Katainen,

Subject: EU Initiatives and Progress on Chronic Diseases

We, the undersigned health organisations, would like to express our appreciation to the European Commission for organising the stakeholder conference **'Towards better prevention and management of chronic diseases'** on 21 April.

However, it struck some attendees at the conference that no new proposals were put forward by the Commission. Apart from specific projects or activities with limited scope, we felt there was no commitment by the Commission to act on chronic diseases (CDs) in a really comprehensive approach. Surely, in the light of the economic burden that CDs place on Member States, **the European Commission can do much better** and, in the words of the Austrian health attaché, **'aim for the big cake rather than the cookies'**.

We are already facing a very serious situation, as **chronic diseases impose a significant cost** (human suffering, reduced workforce, social exclusion, health inequalities etc.) and put a tremendous financial burden on health-care systems. **Seventy to eighty per cent of health-care costs are spent on chronic diseases.** This corresponds to €700 billion per annum in the European Union and the figures are expected to rise in the coming years; **the situation will not improve if we do not act now.** We are sitting on a time bomb and ‘business as usual’ in the European Commission is not an option.

The subsidiarity argument is not satisfactory as there are many ways the EU needs to act for the benefit of its citizens’ health, in addition to actions by the Member States, to ensure a smooth functioning of the internal market. The success of EU tobacco control legislation shows what can be achieved when it acts at EU level and Member States have consistently asked for EU level action in other areas such as alcohol labelling.

The conference conclusions evoke important areas for progress: establishing links between chronic diseases and other policy areas, breaking down silos regarding chronic diseases and enhancing joint actions. Sadly, the conclusions did not recognise the importance of applying the principle ‘health in all policies’, which is vital to make progress in preventing CDs.

We hereby express our deep concerns about the:

- (1) **Lack of a strong political commitment and the very little attention given by the European Commission as an entity to the call to establish** a comprehensive approach that would integrate and enhance the existing initiatives, i.e. **an EU Framework on Chronic Diseases** in the context of international commitments – which was clearly expressed at the conference both by the civil society and by numerous Member States;
- (2) **Seeming lack of awareness on the part of the European Commission regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)** and the need for all UN Member States to take action to meet them by 2030, in particular SDG goals 3.4 and 3.5 (health) and 10 (inequalities);
- (3) **European Commission’s lack of or tardiness in response to the very concrete calls put forward by all stakeholders** regarding the implementation of an alcohol strategy, the ban on industrial trans-fatty acids, the formulation of salt reduction programmes, and the adoption of WHO Air Quality Guideline values, etc. There is a clear case for action by the European Commission in these areas and inaction is no longer justifiable.

It is our firm belief that **chronic diseases deserve much more engagement and political dedication**. The past five years have shown that holding conferences and carrying out reflection processes are not efficient in the absence of concrete follow-up by EU policy makers. They have also shown that there is broad stakeholder agreement on what needs to be done, both among Member States and civil society. The renewed EU Health Policy Platform may be useful in addressing chronic diseases, but does not represent the needed concrete and immediate answer to the urgent issue at hand. **The time for promises and soft measures is over. Action is needed now more than ever if the EU wants to thrive.**

Yours sincerely,

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