

Europe's Beating Cancer Plan Provides Hope For Chronic Disease Prevention

February 4, 2021

The European Chronic Disease Alliance (ECDA) welcomes the prevention pillar of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, published on 3rd February 2021, that places prevention at the heart of the EU's fight against cancer and other chronic diseases.

ECDA supports the targets and measures set out in the plan, which are expected to significantly help to improve the health of all EU citizens. Goals for a tobacco-free generation, and commitment to action in the areas of food and alcohol labelling are much required. Together they have the potential to unlock enormous progress in Europe's agenda of disease prevention and should be implemented swiftly.

Cancer and co-morbidities present a significant challenge across Europe. In 2020, 2.7 million EU citizens were diagnosed with cancer and 1.3 million died from it, accounting for the second cause of death in the EU after cardiovascular diseases (responsible for more than 1.8 million deaths in the EU).

It is ECDA's view that the plan in its current form is a strong basis to successfully improve the prevention and control of cancer and other chronic diseases in Europe.

While the plan is focused on the response to cancer, ECDA encourages the European Commission and policymakers to keep an inclusive mindset in the implementation and roll out of the plan, in order to maximise its benefits and impact in other disease areas. This will be particularly crucial for all proposed actions and initiatives that are linked to or have consequences on cancer co-morbidities – in all sections of the plan.

ECDA remains committed to supporting the implementation of the plan, in particular the prevention pillar, in cooperation with other stakeholders; and re-emphasizes that it will be important to monitor and track the implementation of the flagship initiatives and supportive actions set out in it.

Prevention: a crucial pillar that can have a far-reaching impact

The enhanced attention given to prevention is paramount. It is widely recognised that over 40% of cancers could be prevented by tackling major risk factors: smoking, harmful alcohol consumption, unhealthy diets, the lack of physical activity and air pollution, which are common to the majority of chronic diseases. By limiting major social, environmental and financial health determinants the plan has the potential to successfully halt the growing prevalence of chronic diseases in the EU.

ECDA would like to emphasize the following:

- The cross-sectoral dimension resulting from the 'Health in All Policies' multi-stakeholder approach embedded in the plan - and notably its prevention pillar, will be critical to ensure effectiveness.
- Actions to improve Europeans' health literacy on risk factors are welcome and should be supported by robust outreach plans to maximise results.
- The plan rightly considers the specific needs of children and youth groups together with their increased vulnerability to key risk factors - that is facilitated by the promotion of unhealthy food, drinks and other consumer products such as alcohol and tobacco - with targeted actions on taxation, all forms of marketing and advertising (including online), cross border sales and mandatory harmonised labelling with evidence-based easy-to-understand information.
- The design and launch of a "HealthyLifestyle4All" initiative is welcome but should be accompanied by clear commitments from all participating groups and be designed in a way that effectively drives reduced promotion of unhealthy products, product reformulation and health-enhancing investments and empowers the EU citizens to drive the change.

Further, ECDA stands behind the vision for a “tobacco-free generation” proposed in the plan and welcomes the adoption of stricter rules on novel tobacco products as part of the update of the EU tobacco control framework. Alignment with UN and WHO tobacco reduction targets is important, but the EU should firmly strive for reaching the ambition of less than 5% of the EU population using tobacco by 2040. This would be a major achievement for public health across Europe and would save the lives of millions of Europeans who die every year of a chronic disease caused by tobacco use and/or passive smoking.

Now is the time to achieve front-of-pack food labelling that is mandatory for all EU member states, interpretative and uniform. The further commitment of Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan to make achievements in this area is greatly welcomed. ECDA will be active in supporting such a necessary part of our European response to achieving healthier habits and lifestyles.

According to ECDA Chairman Prof. Vanholder, *“The Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan is promising and set to lessen the prevalence and burden of all chronic diseases, not only cancer. It is particularly pleasing to see that prevention is a cornerstone of the plan, as it should be an important pillar of the EU’s public health actions. COVID-19 has further demonstrated the key role of disease prevention”*.

Harnessing the benefits of early detection and diagnosis

The initiatives provided in the plan to support early detection and diagnosis of cancer shall positively enhance cancer management and survival in Europe, thus have the potential to prevent co-morbidities. In that regard, the commitment to harmonising and implementing high-quality, evidence based screening programmes across EU Member States is a noteworthy milestone. We hope that associated EU initiatives such as the EU4Health programme can provide a good basis for additional actions to promote the role of primary care in achieving early detection of all chronic diseases.

Systemizing multidisciplinary and integrated care for better health outcomes

ECDA supports the aim to better organise the delivery of care and management of co-morbidities through integrated care, shifting away from siloed healthcare approaches, and guaranteeing continuity of care for all patients with chronic diseases. For this to become a reality, the EU shall also ensure that a diversity of specialties is involved from the start in the work of the envisioned EU Network of National Comprehensive Cancer Centres. The creation of new European Reference Networks addressing cancer co-morbidities is an important step and ECDA encourages the Commission to ensure that new Networks address chronic diseases in a wider approach. Training and continuous medical education across disciplines will be key to strengthen and expand a multidisciplinary workforce in all countries. ECDA welcomes the initiatives proposed in the area, which should support and build on the work of established medical societies, to ensure access to similar quality care for every EU citizen.

Supporting an improved quality of life for patients and their families

It is encouraging to note that the plan includes direct measures to enhance the social and employment maintenance and re-integration of patients with cancer. These shall positively impact the lives of many cancer patients, survivors and carers; but could also be valuable instruments to empower and support other chronic disease patients and those close to them.

The Alliance was pleased to see reference in the Plan to return-to-work needs of cancer patients and survivors. Recognising that many of these employment challenges apply also to other chronic diseases, the recommendations of the ECDA and collaborating organisations on boosting the employment of people with chronic diseases remain highly valid and should be a reference guide for further initiative in this area¹, alongside the deliverables of the CHRODIS+ Joint Action.

¹ <https://alliancechronicdiseases.org/boosting-the-employment-of-people-with-chronic-diseases-in-europe/>