

Time to launch a European Cancer Plan

Written by Lieve Wierinck on 5 February 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

It is time that the EU demonstrates the foresight and planning required to tackle the challenge of cancer, writes Lieve Wierinck.



Lieve Wierinck | **Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual**

We currently have a major opportunity to transform the future of cancer in Europe.

The EU can add huge value to cancer care for patients in all Member States, but we need a coordinated and coherent European strategy for tackling cancer.

We should take the opportunity of this year's World Cancer Day to strongly advance this initiative.

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As a cancer survivor, I fully realise how important the breakthroughs of recent decades have been for changing cancer outcomes.

We live in an era where cancer is no longer considered a death sentence. Patients live longer, they can return to their normal daily routines more quickly and they can enjoy a better quality of life overall.

Yet the fight against cancer is far from over. It remains the second leading cause of death in the EU and poses an ever-increasing burden on European societies and health care systems. We need to take the next step.

A European Cancer Plan will facilitate more equitable access to high-quality cancer care across the European Union.

“The fight against cancer is far from over. It remains the second leading cause of death in the EU”

Across Europe, there are numerous best practices in tackling cancer. In my own country, Belgium, the 2015 “Pact for the future” brought together a range of stakeholders. It created a framework that benefited all of those involved, opening doors to more sustainable cancer policies and greater patient access to life-saving treatments.

This highlights how cooperation is the cornerstone of progress. We can only move forward if we work alongside patients, nurses, doctors, governments, insurers and industry.

At a European level, there is a great deal that could be done to help Member States learn from best practices in other countries.

Existing EU initiatives, such as the European Commission Initiative on Breast Cancer (ECIBC) or the numerous actions under the European Health Programme, are already excellent contributions.

These undoubtedly complement Member States’ efforts. The positive impact of European cooperation to date is the reason why I believe that the future of cancer care lies in closer collaboration and coordination.

Given the urgency of tackling cancer, we need to be asking ourselves, “What should we do to accelerate progress towards the next cancer breakthrough?”

The EU is ideally placed to build on existing successes and help tackle the outstanding challenges in cancer care.

“There are considerable disparities between EU countries in access to cancer treatments. This cannot continue”

There are two pillars where a European Cancer Plan could greatly complement and strengthen the efforts of Member States.

First, investment in research. This is one of the most important areas where the EU is ideally placed to enhance Member States’ work on cancer.

Funding research is crucial for bringing about the breakthroughs that will ensure that innovation finds its way to patients as quickly as possible.

However, developing new treatments is always time-consuming and expensive and the process understandably relies on a predictable investment environment.

A European Cancer Plan should include a pillar on investment, whereby the EU dedicates significant resources to supporting researchers and innovative companies working to discover the next advances in cancer care.

Second, the European Cancer Plan must support Member States in ensuring sustainable access to cancer treatments.

This is one of the areas where there is huge potential for the EU to add value. Spending on cancer care in EU Member States has remained unchanged for the past 20 years, whereas the burden of cancer has continued to rise.

There are also considerable disparities between EU countries in access to cancer treatments. This cannot continue; citizens, irrespective of where they live, deserve equal access to potentially life-saving treatments.

We need to acknowledge the vital importance of innovative treatments and ensure that there is equal access to them across all Member States.

Sharing best practice at EU level is crucial to achieving this. It was also one of the key discussions at the European Cancer Forum in December 2018, where an Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) study highlighted the disparities among Member States.

We can and need to do better in bridging these gaps. With these two pillars, we must now seize the opportunity and look to a European Cancer Plan.

The upcoming institutional changeover in 2019 will provide an ideal opportunity to do this. Let us seize the moment and take another great leap forward in tackling cancer.

About the author

Lieve Wierinck (BE, ALDE) is shadow rapporteur in the ITRE Committee on Horizon Europe and is also a cancer survivor

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