Leaving no cancer patient behind during the Coronavirus crisis

Written by Soraya Rodríguez Ramos on 25 May 2020 in Opinion

COVID-19 has hit Europe hard, highlighting the frailties of our cancer patients; it should remind us of our commitments to them, writes María Soraya Rodríguez Ramos.

No cancer patient fights alone, and we should not allow any to do so. Cancer is a disease that affects us all.

Unfortunately, we all know personal stories marked by this disease: parents, colleagues or friends who have put their lives, goals and routines on hold to devote themselves exclusively to the health and wellbeing of their loved ones during their treatment and recovery.
This situation has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a virus that does not discriminate. It disproportionately affects immunosuppressed patients, including cancer patients, who are much more exposed to the contagion and have fewer tools to fight it.

That is why - when the sick and their families are most exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally in this double struggle - it is more important than ever to remember our commitments.

This is an essential fight, in which there is little action in a Europe in which 3.5 million cases are diagnosed every year.

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This means one new case every nine seconds, making it the second-highest cause of death and directly affecting 40 percent of EU citizens.

However, this impact is not only limited to the health of those who suffer from it, but also affects health and social systems, public budgets and society as a whole. If we do not act with new measures, cancer cases could double by 2035.

Similar to epidemiological emergencies, there are risks that can be minimised through prevention for up to 40 percent of cancer cases.

This overwhelming percentage reminds us of the great scope and opportunity to reduce the number of cases in the European Union and the world.

That is why the EU has a strong political commitment in this area. The European Commission committed itself, in its first 100 days in office, to launching citizens’ consultations for elaborating a new plan in the fight against cancer.

This is in addition to the personal commitment by Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides to prioritise progress in the fight against this disease. We have forgotten that curing cancer begins with preventing it. Prevention, along with early diagnosis, is the most powerful weapon we have against cancer.

The suffering caused by this disease could be drastically reduced if we cooperate in prevention, awareness, improve vaccination coverage, reduce environmental risk factors and invest in diagnostic surveillance, innovation and research.

We have cooperative and collaborative resources available that allow us to adopt better practices in treating all phases of the disease.
Above all, we have the political will to carry it out: the European Cancer Plan and the Green Deal, two allies that will collaborate in this fight.

The European Cancer Plan will address the glaring inequalities in treatment and health coverage across countries. It will also strengthen the four pillars - prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care - to ensure the best possible quality of life for patients, survivors and caregivers.

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We also now have the European Green Deal and its commitment to improving our diet, the environment and air quality, among others.

The “Farm to Fork” strategy is an example of this, seeking to reduce dependence on, risk from and the use of chemical pesticides, offering healthier, safer and more nutritious food.

The “Biodiversity Strategy for 2030” will foster a new dialogue with our natural environment to protect humanity from its own pollution.

Improving the health of our ecosystems and reducing pollution will play a key role in health policies in general and in particular the fight against cancer.

We have a great task ahead of us in the wake of COVID-19, but we must not ignore the great advances that have paved the way for the prevention and fight against cancer. On the contrary, we must join forces so that no person suffering from cancer feels alone, neglected or uninformed.

We must continue to prioritise the European Plan to Combat Cancer, enabling Europe to take a central role in this fight.

The members of the MEPs Against Cancer (MAC) Intergroup, to which I belong, will take care of this. As a project of solidarity, the EU must now, more than ever, support Member States and work to make health systems more resilient, efficient and accessible.

The COVID-19 health crisis has shown us that, in the face of global pandemics, the only response is unity. We Europeans must be aware that our cooperation and joint efforts are our great strength in the fight against cancer.

About the author
Soraya Rodríguez Ramos (ES, RE) is a member of Parliament’s MEPs Against Cancer intergroup

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