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Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Tonio Borg delivers a speech on respiratory diseases

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

Launch of the "facts and figures publication" of the lung health white book 2013 by the European Respiratory Society

Press Club, Rue Froissart - Brussels, 10 December 2013

Deputy Minister,

Professor Barnes,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today at the launch of the “facts and figures publication” of the lung health white book 2013 by the European Respiratory Society.

Your “facts and figures” publication - will help assess how best to reduce the burden of respiratory diseases. It clearly serves to show:

- First, that a large number of people are suffering, and also dying from, respiratory diseases;
- Second that breathing clean air is not an automatic assumption for all;
- Third, that much of the burden of respiratory diseases could be alleviated through effective preventive measures.

A number of facts have caught my attention in this publication

- only 10 EU Member States have integrated policies or programmes to fight chronic respiratory diseases;

- European citizens lose, on average, close to 9 months of life expectancy due to poor air quality; and that
- 600,000 people in the EU die from respiratory diseases every year; over half of these are due to lung cancer or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease linked to smoking.

The need for effective prevention and early diagnosis of respiratory diseases is indisputable.

Just think of how many cases of lung cancer, how much suffering, how many deaths we could prevent if people stopped smoking. Not to mention how much money health systems could save in treating smoking related diseases.

The European Commission is keen to support action to prevent respiratory diseases. Let me give you some examples:

We have legislation on air quality, and rules regarding pollutants that cause respiratory diseases;

We support research and development in prevention, diagnosis and treatment of respiratory diseases through the EU framework research programme and through the health programme.

And, as you know, the Commission is particularly committed to pursuing action on tobacco control.

Tobacco kills half of its users, which die on average 14 years earlier than non-smokers. 70% of smokers start smoking under the age of 18; and hardly anyone starts smoking after the age of 25.

This is why the Commission proposed to strengthen the Tobacco Products Directive to ensure that tobacco products look and taste like tobacco, and feature accurate and visible information on the consequences of smoking.

I am persuaded that negotiations will lead to the adoption of an ambitious Directive during the current term of the Parliament. Actually, later this morning, progress in negotiations will be highlighted at the Health Council.

Our action does not stop at prevention.

Both early diagnosis of respiratory diseases and adequate treatment represent a significant challenge – as the European Respiratory Society stressed in its input to the EU reflection process on chronic diseases.

In this context, I take note that the Society has called for a comprehensive policy and action plan addressing chronic diseases. Indeed, with this reflection and consultation process, many Member States and stakeholders called for:

- continued EU action on risk factors;
- the development of validated prevention approaches; and
- a stronger focus on targeted screening, early diagnosis and secondary prevention of diseases.

I conclude from this process that there is scope for increased action at EU level to address major chronic diseases, including respiratory diseases. The Commission therefore intends to:

- start a Joint Action with Member States and stakeholders on addressing chronic diseases in January 2014
- continue to give priority to actions addressing the key risk factors for chronic diseases and look at identifying innovative preventive actions;
- continue its work on the sustainability of health systems and healthy and active ageing;

- further encourage Member States to use EU mechanisms to promote prevention and improve treatment of chronic diseases.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Addressing chronic diseases will remain an important priority for EU health policy.

Let me finish by inviting the European Respiratory Society to the first EU summit on Chronic Diseases to be held here in Brussels next year on 3 and 4 April. This event will provide an opportunity to help determine how to take matters forward in this domain.

Finally, I wish you all a successful event and hope that the white book and the facts and figures compilation will prove both useful and influential.

Thank you.