

**Tonio Borg**

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

**Commissioner Borg addresses a conference on improving fairness and equity in health in Europe, improving access to health and combatting discrimination in health**

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Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends the conference on "Health in Europe – Making it fairer"

**Brussels, Belgium, 18 March 2014**

**"HEALTH IN EUROPE - MAKING IT FAIRER"**

**CHARLEMAGNE BUILDING, BRUSSELS**

**TUESDAY 18 MARCH 2014: 9:30 - 10:30HRS**

**OPENING SPEECH**

Vice President Reding,

Ministers,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to thank you all for attending this major conference, addressing the vital issues of:

- improving fairness in health in Europe;
- improving access to healthcare; and
- combating all forms of discrimination in health.

I am very pleased to welcome so many of you here today - over 400 participants with a wide range of different experiences and perspectives. I am sure however, that we stand united in our determination to improve fairness in Health.

Today is an opportunity, not just to exchange information, but also, more importantly, to share our views and concerns and table ideas for the future.

It is in this spirit that, this afternoon, in the parallel sessions, Ministers, Members of Parliament and NGOs will sit together in the same room, discuss together, and shape together a set of conclusions about what more needs to be done to improve fairness in Health.

I am particularly honoured to share this platform with Vice President of the European Commission Viviane Reding – who made very clear in her eloquent address not only how strongly the Commission feels about combatting discrimination, but also how far we have come over the last 5 years.

I want to make equally clear my total commitment as Commissioner for Health to fighting discrimination and stigma in health.

The fight against discrimination has been a fundamental tenet of the European Union since its creation.

In the field of health we have made some significant advances. EU law prohibits discrimination in relation to services, including health services, on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights enshrines everybody's right to access preventive healthcare and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices.

The Charter also states that *any* discrimination based on grounds such as gender, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

The protection of these fundamental rights is ensured through EU laws and actions by EU institutions and through national laws and the relevant authorities and organisations.

Most importantly these rights must be respected by the day to day behaviour of the people of Europe – through fairness, tolerance and respect – at workplaces, in health settings, in and indeed throughout society. This means all of us.

The recent report on health inequalities in the EU shows that, while the gap in life expectancy and infant mortality between Member States of the EU has narrowed over the last 10 years, the health gap – for example between rich and poor and between certain social groups – has not. In fact, in some instances the gap has actually widened.

The Commission has put in place a range of actions to help Member States reduce these health inequalities. For example:

- We funded a joint action on health inequalities through the EU Health Programme, supporting policy development at national and regional level and with the involvement of stakeholders.
- We have made reducing health inequalities a key objective of the European Regional Development and Investment Fund for 2014-2020.

- We have made access to healthcare one of the four key objectives of the EU Framework for national Roma integration strategies; and have asked EU Member States to translate this into concrete and effective measures. EU funding is available to support such efforts.
- We are supporting action on combatting discrimination and stigma in mental health through a specific joint action with Member States which we launched last year.
- We are working with our partners in civil society and Member States, through the HIV/AIDS Civil Society Forum and the Think Tank, with other stakeholders, UNAIDS and Commission agencies to strengthen our approach on human rights in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS and co-infections.
- In addition, we have supported dialogue with the World Health Organization regarding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex concerns on discrimination in access to healthcare and the de-listing of “transgender” in the International Classification of Diseases.

Our action does not stop here.

- Later this month, we will launch a new Joint Action on Cancer Control so as to help improve the quality of cancer treatment for all who need it; and we support the “European Bill for Patients’ Rights” launched last month by the European Cancer Concord.
- Let me also mention the European Innovation Partnership on healthy and active ageing, which is promoting inter-regional cooperation to improve the lives of senior citizens across Europe.

We have come a long way, but I believe there is still a long way to go to fight all forms of discrimination and secure equality and fairness in health.

Further action is needed, particularly the development of integrated policies at national level to address the causes of health inequalities.

These include inequalities in access to healthcare as well as factors such as income, education, living standards, working conditions and health-related behaviours affected by the social gradient – such as tobacco use, harmful alcohol consumption and poor nutrition.

To address all these issues successfully, we need to rely on effective and sustainable health systems which can ensure fair access to healthcare for all.

I would also argue for more focus in specific areas where stigma and discrimination are a particular issue, including:

- ethnic minorities, Roma, and migrants;
- people with disabilities, mental disorders, HIV and other chronic conditions;
- people who suffer discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, and age; and
- the economically deprived, those hit by financial problems, due particularly to unemployment.

Before I conclude, let me briefly mention our work on HIV/AIDS. Many of you here today were also present last May when we discussed HIV and Human Rights.



We heard then about the difficulties that many people living with HIV face in relation to getting access to high quality care and the discrimination they can suffer – and I am looking forward to discussing this issue further this afternoon.

I made it clear in May that the Commission takes these concerns very seriously and would consider what further action to take.

Today I am pleased to announce that last Friday the Commission put forward a renewed EU Action Plan on HIV/AIDS up until 2016.

The need for continued political leadership, particularly to combat stigma and discrimination in HIV/AIDS is at the very centre of this Action Plan.

The Plan will also provide focus on related issues on access to care and on combatting co-infections such as tuberculosis and hepatitis.

I believe this marks an important step to keep the EU at the forefront of joint efforts to reduce new infections, AIDS deaths and discrimination cases.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I fully recognise that making health fairer in Europe is not something that can be achieved by any government or institution acting alone. Neither can it be achieved overnight.

It requires genuine partnerships and sustained application across society. Most of all, it involves the commitment of individual people, working together to make it happen. And this is why we are here today.

I hope and expect our discussions today will bring to the fore new ideas on how we can best work together to achieve our ambitions for fairer health in Europe.

I wish you all a successful, enjoyable and – above all – fruitful conference

Thank you.