

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

**Commissioner Borg delivers speech on
how to address the chronic disease
burden in Europe**

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

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends the EU Summit on Chronic Diseases

Brussels, Belgium, 04 April 2014

4 APRIL 2014, 09:00HRS
CHARLEMAGNE BUILDING
ROOM ALCIDE DE GASPERI

OPENING SPEECH

“THE COMMISSION'S ROLE IN TACKLING CHRONIC DISEASES”

Ministers,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome all to the first EU Summit on Chronic Diseases!

I am very pleased to see so many of you here today, from all corners of Europe.

Let me extend a special welcome to our distinguished panel here this morning at our opening session.

Mr Adonis Georgiadis, the Health Minister of Greece;

Dr James Reilly, Health Minister of Ireland;

Ms Beatrice Lorenzin, Minister of Health and Social Affairs of Italy;

Mr Mark Drakeford, Minister of Health and Social Services of the Welsh Government;

Ms Mercedes Vinuesa, General Director for Public Health of Spain;

Mr De Cock, General Administrator of INAMI, the Belgian Institute of medical insurance;

Mr Norbert Lameire, representing the European Chronic Disease Alliance; and

Dr Gauden Galea of the World Health Organisation.

In addition, I am grateful that Mr Joseph Jimenez, Chief Executive Officer of Novartis, is also able to join us today.]

I convened this summit to provide a forum to discuss how to address the chronic disease burden in Europe; and to trigger new ideas on how to make our health and social systems more innovative, effective and sustainable to face this major challenge.

I very much count on everybody's participation today.

The chronic disease burden and the corresponding pressure on health systems is attracting ever closer political attention – and rightly so – not least because of its implications for people's health, but because of its implications for economic and social systems.

Our primary concern must be the unprecedented burden the chronic disease epidemic inflicts on citizens.

Chronic diseases are the main cause of death across the EU. Less easy to calculate, but equally relevant, is the massive amount of suffering that chronic diseases provoke.

This burden can only grow bigger as our populations grow older.

Sadly, as life expectancy has risen steadily over many years, healthy life years have failed to keep pace – and this lies at the very heart of the problem.

And in addition to the human cost, there is of course the economic and societal impact of the rise in chronic diseases: spiralling healthcare costs; loss of productivity; increased absenteeism – all take their toll, exerting a heavy price.

A study by the World Economic Forum estimated that the cumulative loss of output due to chronic diseases would increase by up to 4% of annual global GDP by 2030.

In the EU, chronic diseases account for 70 to 80% of all healthcare costs – more than €700 billion every year.

97% of this is devoted to treatment, whilst a mere 3% is spent on prevention.

Does this proportion make sense, when many of the most prevalent chronic diseases are largely preventable?

Is it appropriate to dedicate only 3% to prevention, when we know that by addressing tobacco, alcohol abuse, poor nutrition and sedentary living, as well as vaccination, we could actually prevent many people from getting ill?

Take diabetes, for example – which now affects some 8% of the EU population.

Much of the rise in diabetes across the European Union is linked to obesity and a lack of physical activity.

Indeed, we know that enhancing physical activity can even be an important tool in secondary prevention to improve the situation of patients already diagnosed with diabetes.

Another example of cost-effective prevention is to diagnose and treat atrial fibrillation so as to prevent stroke. This could save countless lives, with modest investment.

Prevention through vaccination is also increasingly facing the challenge of vaccine scepticism.

Collectively, we need a shift of mind-set to successfully address chronic diseases – from reactive to proactive.

We need to focus on developing innovative and sustainable approaches to prevention and disease management.

To do this, we need to work together in a multi-sectoral manner.

We need to ensure a truly multilateral collaboration involving governments, the private sector, civil society and individual citizens as the principal managers of their own health.

Another shift of mind-set is needed in the way that health expenditure is broadly perceived – away from being considered as a drain on public finances, towards a positive view of wisely-targeted health investments to boost social and economic development.

On the face of it, I have painted a rather bleak picture – but there are, of course, a wide range of initiatives already in place which contribute to fighting chronic diseases.

Indeed, the Commission is committed to taking action – adding value wherever possible, actively promoting co-operation among Member States and supporting their efforts.

For example, as regards promoting healthy living, the EU is at the forefront in the fight against tobacco.

You will no doubt be aware of the recent success in strengthening the Tobacco Products Directive. We also have our anti-tobacco campaigns, the most recent being “Ex-smokers are unstoppable”.

Let me also mention the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, which co-ordinates action encouraging national, regional and local initiatives across Europe.

And as part of the EU Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related health issues, the Platform goes hand in hand with a co-ordination mechanism with Member States, who have recently agreed upon an Action Plan on Childhood Obesity.

A similar process is underway to prepare a Member States' focused action on youth and binge drinking.

Another important initiative is the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing which aims to increase the average number of healthy life years of EU citizens by 2 years, by 2020.

The EU is also very active as regards fighting specific chronic diseases – cancer being perhaps the most prominent example.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Commission recently conducted a reflection process gathering Member States and stakeholders' views on what more needs to be done to tackle chronic diseases.

The outcomes of this initiative are clear – pointing to the need for sustainable, coordinated approaches to chronic diseases, stressing the importance of addressing risk factors, investing in prevention and strengthening health systems.

A first outcome of the reflection process is the Joint Action to promote Healthy Ageing and address Chronic Diseases, which we launched in January.

I am very pleased that this action brings together 23 Member States – including the countries of the Ministers present here today - to exchange good practices on prevention and management of chronic diseases – a crucial element in our future efforts as we map the way forward.

Which brings me to this Summit – which I expect will lead us to a better understanding and clearer perspective of how and where EU action can add further value in addressing chronic diseases.

We will discuss the role of the EU and the support it can give to Member States.

We will focus on actions and measures which are evidence-based and cost-effective; on how our health and care systems will need to adapt; and on how we can reach out to everybody in our efforts to contain chronic diseases.

The Commission stands ready and willing to play its full part. We are fully prepared to examine how our policies and actions can be adapted to better address the challenge.

We all know there are no easy solutions, no quick fixes. We need a fully co-ordinated, long-term approach. And this is why we are here today.

The Commission will reflect carefully on the conclusions emerging from this conference – however radical they may be.

So please – be bold; be brave; and be creative.

Thank you.