

**Tonio Borg**

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

## **Commissioner Borg delivers speech on EU Action for Carers**

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Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends a meeting of the European Parliament Interest Group on Carers

**Brussels, Belgium, 09 April 2014**

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT INTEREST GROUP ON CARERS**

**WEDNESDAY 9 APRIL 2014, 12.30-14.30**

**BRUSSELS, EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. ROOM ASP -5G1**

**SPEECH**

Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the members of the European Parliament Interest Group on Carers – in particular Madame Harkin - for their invitation today and for their commitment to support informal carers.

The work of Europe's many informal carers is invaluable to individuals and communities alike and it is increasingly important that this group is given a voice at EU level; and that this voice is heard.

Your proposal for an EU strategy, “Enabling Carers to Care” highlights the unique role that informal carers play and the grave difficulties they face.

They receive little support from healthcare systems; they risk exclusion from the labour markets and even society. Often, they risk their own health.

With population ageing, the issue of care provision is become increasingly important.

Living longer does not necessarily mean living healthier. We find instead, that we live a higher proportion of our years in poor health. Today, we spend on average 20% of our lifespan in ill-health.

People over 65 can expect to spend half of their remaining years suffering from a disease or from functional limitations.

An ageing population also means a shrinking workforce, including fewer health professionals. In the European Union there is a projected shortage of 1 million professionals in the health sector by 2020 – up to 2 million, if we include ancillary healthcare professions.

While this demand can create new jobs and employment opportunities, it also means that a higher proportion of people will have to rely on informal care.

Yet, already today, as the strategy you are presenting “Enabling Carers to Care” highlights, around 80% of care across the EU is provided by families, friends and other informal carers.

The European Commission recognises the crucial role that informal carers play. While it is primarily the individual EU countries that are responsible for supporting their work and for providing the framework for health and social care, the Commission has also launched a number of initiatives to support carers.

Our common goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth – as defined in the Europe2020 Strategy – cannot be met if informal carers are left out of the labour market or overlooked by welfare systems.

One of the Commission's first actions in this area was the adoption of the Social Investment Package in February 2013, for which Commission Andor is in the lead.

Part of this Package - as presented in a Commission Staff Working Document on long-term care – is about assessing the situation of family carers, the importance of their contribution to care, as well as the difficulties they are facing.

Many find themselves excluded from the labour market, losing their social entitlements or even suffering health problems of their own. More women than men are affected as they are often the person caring for elderly relatives.

The Social Protection Committee, which brings together all Member States and the Commission, will be presenting in June a report on the current situation regarding long-term care.

This report will identify what support is available to informal carers, as well as the most effective ways of ensuring that all disabled or chronically ill people can get the help they need without overburdening their families.

Moving on, the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing is another important initiative launched by the Commission.

The Partnership provides a new model for collaborative innovation in the field of ageing, and support to scale-up good practices. It recognises the unique role informal carers play and seeks to involve and support them.

Let me give some examples of how different players in this Partnership are actively involving carers:

- Scotland has recognised the importance of regional coordination between health and care services and developed a dedicated strategy for carers. The support offered to carers includes respite care opportunities, training on income maximisation and advocacy.
- In the Active Patient programme in the Basque country, informal carers are involved in decision making for care options and in the development of new technologies, such as tele-monitoring devices, to ensure they fit their needs.
- Carers also have an important role to play in preventing malnutrition and frailty. Screening programmes in Ireland recognise their role and take it into consideration when assessing the nutrition status of the patients.

The strength of this Partnership lies in the shared understanding about what constitutes efficient care services organised around the often complex needs of people.

The evidence emerging from this work makes a strong case for a model based on the continuous management of care to support older people to remain functional and to remain in their homes or preferred settings.

Another initiative involving carers I would like to mention is the Joint Action on Alzheimer Cooperation Valuation in Europe – ALCOVE – which is co-financed by the European Commission through the Health Programme.

ALCOVE has started a collective reflection on the best means of preserving quality of life, autonomy and the rights of both the people living with dementia and the people taking care of them.

ALCOVE experts have identified patient and family carer interventions as a key factor to address the behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia.

The Commission is also fostering specific initiatives to support the work of healthcare assistants, who are well positioned to establish links between healthcare, community care, patients and informal carers. As such, they can support and guide informal carers in their daily caregiving.

Based on the results of a recent project, the Commission is now looking at ways to define common core competences, skills and knowledge for healthcare assistants to prepare them for these tasks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much work is already underway to promote and support the role of informal carers in the EU.

We are looking forward to hearing back from stakeholders, and to disseminating good practices.

These will form the foundations of the evidence-base to consider a *possible* carers' strategy under the next European Parliament and Commission.



Let me finish by thanking this Group once again for its commitment and for giving a voice to this often overlooked and under-valued group of citizens, who tirelessly undertake such a crucial role in society.