Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

Commissioner Borg addresses the European Parliament's Interest Group on Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends a joint meeting of the European Parliament Interest Groups MEPs Against Cancer and MEPs for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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JOINT MEETING OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT INTEREST GROUPS

MEPS AGAINST CANCER
AND
MEPS FOR COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM)

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SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me say how pleased I am to address this meeting of the European Parliament's Interest Group on Complementary and Alternative Medicine on the important economic discussion of this form of medicine. May I also thank, in particular, Mr Peterle for his kind invitation.

Let me start by setting out the Commission's basic vision of the broad future of public health in the European Union – a vision which is generally shared, I trust, by the European Parliament.

We are seeking to map a way forward towards sustainable health systems offering a high level of health protection and which put patients firmly at their core.

Empowering people to make well informed choices about their health and their treatment options is important for the citizens. It is equally important to drive up the quality and efficiency of healthcare systems across the European Union.

All patients in Europe should have access to high-quality, affordable and safe healthcare regardless of who they are, where they live, or how much they earn.

It is an important principle of the Union's pharmaceutical legislation that patients should have access to the medicinal products of their choice. This includes innovative medicines as much as traditional herbal and homeopathic medicinal products. Of course all necessary measures must be taken to ensure the quality, safety and efficacy of the medicinal products in question.

This explains why the legislation stipulates that no medicinal product may be placed on the market of a Member State unless a marketing authorisation has been issued at European level or by the national competent authorities.

The aim of these rules is to safeguard public health and at the same time increase market access by facilitating the free circulation of medicinal products within the Union.

The Union fosters an enabling regulatory environment for the development of innovative medicines that are safe and efficacious as well as providing legal certainty for developers and offering incentives for innovation.

The centralised marketing authorisation for new medicines simplifies access to all the Member States' markets.

But above all, it maintains the highest standards of scientific evaluation of these products thus preserving the confidence of patients.

In a nutshell, the EU has an optimised procedure geared towards meeting the needs of innovative medicine producers and to the ultimate benefit of patients.

At the same time, the Union fully recognises that there are complementary and alternative medicines with particular characteristics which go beyond the concept of conventional medicinal products.

In contrast with the full marketing authorisation requirement that applies to medicinal products, traditional herbal and homeopathic medicinal products benefit from a simplified registration procedure provided they fulfil certain criteria, set out in European law.

This procedure is less burdensome than that required by the full marketing authorisation; it therefore facilitates access of these products to the market.

In the area of complementary and alternative medicines, availability can vary, sometimes widely, amongst Member States.

This arises because competent authorities in Member States are entitled to ask for additional data if they deem it necessary to assess the safety of a medicinal product.

In order to address this variance in availability our aim has been to improve understanding and co-operation amongst Member States. This is pursued through the European Medicines Agency Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products and the Heads of Medicines Agencies Working Group on Homeopathic Medicinal Products.

Patient empowerment is on the increase. It progressively serves to put patients in the driver's seat – taking charge and control of their own health.

Patients often know what treatment works for them, and which healthcare is efficient for their condition. This can include the use of complementary medicine.

Patients are free to choose whether they want to be on a contribution of both with conventional or complementary medicine. In a healthcare setting – when visiting the general practitioner for instance – there are limits on which treatments patients have the right to choose. But both doctor and patient should strive for a fruitful dialogue on the different treatment options.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me come back to the subject of today's conference – this economic discussion of complementary and alternative medicine.

Our health systems across Europe are under double pressure. From one side we face a tightening of public expenditure as a consequence of the economic crisis. On the other side, the cost of providing healthcare tends to constantly increase – this is partly due to the increasing demand of an ageing population, and partly to the mounting costs of healthcare products and services.

Health systems are, in essence, being asked to provide more with fewer resources – a difficult problem to solve.

The broad solution lies in increasing the overall efficiency of our health systems, and investing in cost-effective innovation. Alternative medicine can play an important role in this. Any treatment which demonstrates better outcomes at lower costs is a step forward on the path towards more sustainable health systems.

I will present a study on the availability of medicines for human use by the end of this year. It will also look at the availability of complementary and alternative medicines.

This study, will consider the possible effects that European legislation on authorisation of medicines has on their availability.

In addition to this legislation, there are other important factors that influence the availability, such as pricing and reimbursement policies which are the competence of the Member States.

That is why the Commission is also engaged in a Process of Corporate Responsibility in the field of Pharmaceuticals.

This Process brings together Member States and other interested stakeholders on a voluntary basis to exchange ideas and knowledge on topics related to access to medicines.

In addition, the Commission has supported the development of research in complementary and alternative medicine under the Seventh Framework Programme, in particular the so-called "CAMbrella" project.

The findings of this project were presented in November 2012. The primary aim was to promote and facilitate Member States co-operation to further explore complementary and alternative medicines in the EU and to organise future European research.

This initiative and direction could be an important step forward to widen patient choice while ensuring that patients can have confidence in the safety and efficacy of alternative and complementary healthcare.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After these introductory remarks, I am now very interested to hear about your views.

I have to apologise however that due to a conflicting commitment, I will not be able to stay until the end of your conference.

Thank you for your attention.

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