

HIGH LEVEL EVENT

"30 YEARS OF EU ACTION AGAINST CANCER"

LUXEMBOURG, CERCLE CITÉ

15 SEPTEMBER 2015, 2:30-5:30 PM

SPEECH

Madame la Ministre,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today to celebrate 30 years of European Union action on cancer.

Let me thank the Minister – as the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council - for hosting this event.

My special thanks goes to the founding fathers of the very first European programme "Europe against Cancer" – who here with us here today and who have started our action on cancer back in the eighties.

I must say that the programme 'Europe against cancer' is very personal to me. I feel part of it. When it was created I was already a practising physician. I remember my very dear fellow colleagues who were able (at that time!) to cross borders and go to other European capitals, meet the scientists, learn and cooperate.

Indeed, this programme was also special because it built bridges between different political systems. In 1985, Heads of State and government, no matter the politics, called for the launch of a European programme on cancer at the European Council in Milan. I believe this was the very first action ever at European level on public health in general. On the top of that it united so very different political ideologies.

I believe that this led to an essential resolution: Yes - you can cure cancer. You can manage it, you can fight it and you can cure it. Therefore, thanks again to those who allowed this programme to come to life and who kept it going.

This first cancer programme - formally launched in 1987 – laid the foundations for our work on cancer today.

The European Code against Cancer (*Europos kovos su veziu kodeksas*) was also developed in 1987 and remains a key tool in our efforts to prevent cancer and promote early detection as well as early treatment across the European Union.

I am pleased that just last year the code was updated to reflect the latest scientific knowledge.

I would also like to thank all the colleagues here today, in particular the members of our Expert Group on Cancer Control.

Your commitment and determination to fight cancer, and to improve the lives of people with cancer are a source of inspiration to me.

You can count on me to do everything in my power to pursue action at European level to address cancer.

A lot has happened since 1987.

Since then, European action on cancer has focused on: prevention, screening, disseminating information and controlling cancer.

Allow me a few words on prevention.

The essential means of prevention is the early management of risk factors.

One of the most important risk factors is of course tobacco. At European level we have taken strong action on it. We have carried out anti-smoking campaigns. The EU is also working with international partners to reduce tobacco consumption worldwide. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) is an international treaty on health, with currently 177 Parties from across the world.

We have solid European legislation in place regulating tobacco products and ensuring that people are aware of what smoking does to their health.

I was happy to close negotiations on the new EU Tobacco law during the Lithuanian Presidency, when I was chairing the Council as Health Minister; and I very much look forward to seeing the large picture warnings on tobacco packs as from next Spring. I hope they will dissuade a lot of people from smoking and thus prevent much suffering from cancer.

Alcohol abuse is another key cancer risk factor which is often underestimated and underrated; and the same can be said of obesity and lack of physical inactivity.

Since 1985 the Commission has developed work on all these risk factors.

The decision on 'Europe against Cancer' is a good example of political will in action for the current leaders in the European Council and at national level. Have they not taken this long reaching resolution to focus on prevention – we would have yet another cost of non-Europe, in financial terms, but mostly in terms of peoples' lives.

Therefore it is my intention to mobilise all actors – Member States, stakeholders, European and National Parliaments to work together to continue the commitment to tackle all risk factors from tobacco to alcohol abuse - and also nutrition and physical activity – as key causes of cancer and other diseases.

Moving on to screening, I believe here in this room we all agree that screening well and on time can make the difference between life and death, for millions of people.

And this is why the Council Recommendation on cancer screening of 2003 remains a cornerstone of European action against cancer. (As you know, the Recommendation defended cancer screening programmes for colorectal, breast and cervical cancer.)

These programmes are based on European guidelines which set a benchmark for best practice in cancer screening; issued and regularly updated by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

And it is not a question of just shaping guidelines: we have put much effort on training of health professionals and on public information, all of which continue to this day.

By implementing these guidelines, Member States can both save lives and organise their health systems more effectively; and thus cope better with the financial pressures they are facing.

I have spoken about prevention and about screening, allow me a few words on information. We have to ask ourselves how to raise awareness about the screening programmes.

I have a very recent example which surprised me in a very positive way. On a flight with one of the EU Member State airline I heard the flight attendants making a call on behalf of the national health authorities promoting the free of charge breast cancer screening.

I invite all the operators, be it airlines, railways or others, to make use of the public space – be it physical, digital, virtual - and modern technology with all the possibilities that it opens to all of us - and support this type of communication campaigns.

Our action on cancer aims to empower citizens with the best information to maximise their chances of avoiding cancer when possible.

Back in 2009, in the 'Commission Communication on Action against Cancer: European Partnership', we set ourselves the ambitious target of reducing the incidence of cancer by 15% by 2020; and of helping Member States develop solid national cancer plans. I believe we have achieved good results in this context:

- 26 of the 28 Member States now have a National Cancer Control Plan in place. I encourage the remaining ones to join the club.

- More than 500 million screening examinations for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer are due in public programmes in the EU between 2010 and 2020.
- We estimate that there has been a reduction of 10% in the incidence of the most frequent cancers in the EU over the last ten years, which enables us to keep on track to achieve our target of a 15% reduction by 2020.
- Progress has been made towards developing an operational European Cancer Information System.

In addition, EU-funded projects – through the Health Programme and the Research Programme – support the target of reducing cancer incidence by sharing expertise, raising standards and reducing health inequalities.

Over the past seven years, the EU has invested more than 1.4 billion Euros in international collaborative research, mobility programmes, public-private partnerships and coordination of national cancer research efforts.

A final word on controlling cancer.

We are now embarking on a new phase: We have set up a new Joint action to improve quality in comprehensive cancer control.

We are also developing an accreditation scheme at European level for breast cancer units – so that women know what are the best place to go to for treatment.

Maintaining a long-term vision is an important guiding factor for our actions, as is the partnership approach – bringing together governments, NGOs, Scientific Societies, as well as international organisations and industry.

To deliver results on cancer we need to work together, we need to have everybody on board.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1985 marked the dawn of European Action to fight cancer. The anniversary of the Council conclusions of 1985 that year provides a suitable platform to look forward to the work ahead.

Today I would like to pay tribute to the several generations of people who have devoted their time and effort to this collective work on cancer.

I would like to express my personal admiration for the work of the first Cancer Committee. Today's Expert Group carries the responsibility of taking forward their legacy.

I am committed to taking up the challenge and taking our work further – building on what is now on the table: the new European Code, the joint actions with member states, new guidelines on breast cancer screening and on quality assurance.

We need to continue our fight against cancer, we need to put telemedicine and e-health to the benefit of cancer prevention and care, encourage the use of advanced therapies and benefit from the cross-border directive. We need to develop cancer register. All in all, we must take full advantage of the modern technology.

I firmly believe there is potential for making further progress in the field of cancer, for more ambition in promoting awareness, increasing prevention and improving the prospects of cancer patients.

The 30th anniversary we are celebrating today is an opportunity for us to renew our shared commitment – an opportunity for institutions, governments and partners, and also patients to look to the future; to prevent cancer as far as possible, to ensure equality and to maximise quality of life for each and every citizen.

Thank you.