



European
Commission

Ensuring Equal Access to All Cancer in Women: Europe's Beating Cancer Plan

2 FEBRUARY 2022, 14H30-16H15

Hybrid event

Event report

Patients, policymakers and cancer experts gathered for a hybrid event on 2 February 2022 to mark the one-year anniversary of the publication of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, just ahead of World Cancer Day. The meeting was the first of a series focused on how to increase equal access to cancer prevention and care. It put the spotlight on cancers that affect women, including cervical, ovarian and breast cancers. The voices of patients and survivors were to the fore, supported by input from experts and contributions from the European Commission, European Parliament, and the French Presidency of the European Council.

Welcoming participants, **Ursula von der Leyen**, President of the European Commission, said the fight against cancer is a priority for the Commission. President von der Leyen added that there was substantial progress over the past year, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, which disrupted screening, diagnosis and treatment. She highlighted the creation of Comprehensive Cancer Centres in helping to address inequalities between and within Member States. **"Because everyone in our European Union should get the cancer treatment they need, especially for rare and complex conditions,"** President von der Leyen said. Comprehensive Cancer Centres will be part of the European Network of Cancer Centres by 2025.

This focus on inequality was a recurring theme, alongside the challenges women face in accessing screening and treatment, and in reintegrating into society and the workplace after their recovery. The Commission announced four new EU Cancer Plan actions:

- The **Cancer Inequalities Registry** to identify trends and disparities, including those arising from gender, and guide investment decisions.
- A **call for evidence on cancer screening** to inform the update of the 2003 Council Recommendation on screening.
- A **Joint Action on HPV vaccination** will support the target of eliminating cervical cancer by vaccinating 90% of girls by 2030 and extending the availability of vaccination for boys.
- The **EU Network of Youth Cancer Survivors** will strengthen long-term follow-up in cancer care plans and connect young people affected by cancer.



Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, stressed the importance of European cooperation to deliver optimal care to everyone in the EU. **“We will ensure that the voices of those whose lives have been touched by cancer will be heard,”** Commissioner Kyriakides said.

Íc6 T6th, a cervical cancer survivor and past Co-Chair of the European Network of Gynaecological Cancer Advocacy Groups, illustrated the physical and emotional toll the disease can take on women and their families. “I thought I was going to die,” she told the meeting. “I was afraid for those who I would leave behind.” Ms T6th spoke of her frustration when healthcare professionals did not take her concerns on board by and of her long journey to recovery. Today, Ms T6th is a vocal cancer advocate, championing HPV vaccination, access to treatment and enhanced rehabilitation services. “I was lucky to be referred to an oncology centre and have the best treatment in time,” she said. “Other women were not so lucky.”

Christiane Amanpour, CNN Chief International Correspondent also underscored the value of early detection. “Ovarian cancer is often misdiagnosed as a urinary tract infection, bloating or irritable bowel syndrome.” This can lead to late diagnosis, which narrows the treatment options, she added. Ms Amanpour noted that her own cancer story ended well - she was diagnosed and treated promptly - but women with lower awareness or who face barriers to accessing services are at higher risk of poor outcomes.



Tanja Spanic, a cancer survivor and President of Europa Donna said that despite advances in detection and technology, more than 140,000 women die of breast cancer in Europe each year. She highlighted the role of European guidelines and quality assurance schemes in enhancing cancer care in Member States. Ms Spanic called for better access to innovative tools that tailor treatment to individual patients, including genomic and diagnostic testing. “We must move beyond the one-size-fits-all paradigm for cancer treatment,” she said.

Europe has an opportunity to eliminate cervical cancer by embracing vaccination, according to **Prof. Andreas Charalambous**, President of the European Cancer Organisation. “HPV vaccination for girls and boys is the single most effective prevention tool at our fingertips,” he said. “The data is clear: HPV vaccination works.” Despite this, access to preventative measures is not universal. **Prof. Nicole Concini**, President of the European Society of Gynaecological Oncology, pointed to variation between Member States in access to HPV vaccines, as well as differences in reimbursement for PAP smear and HPV testing. “This underlines the importance of updating the Council recommendations on cancer screening to ensure these recommendations follow the latest available scientific evidence,” she said.





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Several speakers noted the importance of listening to survivors, also welcoming the performance by the Sea of Change choir. We should not underestimate the right to resume normal life, according to **Dr Alberto Costa**, Special Adviser for EU policy on cancer. He said some women struggle to secure bank loans and insurance despite being cured. "I congratulate France on taking steps to address this and hope to see more progress across the EU," he said. "We need to hear survivors' personal stories, so this is not a forgotten issue."

The political momentum behind Europe's fight against cancer was evident in contributions from the EU institutions. In a video message, **Dr. Olivier Véran**, French Minister of Solidarity and Health, said the French Presidency was determined to advance the work of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. "It is a wonderful example of the health union," he said, adding that France would accelerate cooperation at European level and work to guarantee better access to therapies. The issue of inequalities was stressed by **Veronique Trillet-Lenoir**, MEP and Rapporteur of the Parliament report on Strengthening Europe in the fight against cancer, who said survival rates can vary by 25% depending on where the patient lives. "Inequalities in cancer are a reflection of social inequalities, including gender inequalities," she said. "We must address not only women's cancer but take account of the particular vulnerabilities facing mothers, wives and daughters." MEP Trillet-Lenoir also called for joint European assessment of the value of cancer treatments, as well as joint EU purchasing programmes using the model applied to buying COVID-19 vaccines.

Closing the event, **Margaritis Schinas**, European Commission Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, said inequalities have no place in a Europe built on solidarity. "Each citizen deserves the same access to cancer prevention and care," he said. "This is what we stand for. This is Europe at its best."