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

Commissioner Dalli delivers speech on "Epilepsy – How do we overcome stigma?"

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John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends a Maltese National Conference on Epilepsy

Qawra, Malta, 25 February 2012

**MALTESE NATIONAL CONFERENCE
"EPILEPSY - HOW DO WE OVERCOME STIGMA?"**

DOLMEN RESORT HOTEL, MALTA

SATURDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2012, 09:00

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today and to contribute to discussions on the challenge of overcoming the stigma of epilepsy.

Epilepsy causes great suffering to 6 million people across Europe and to their families. In Malta alone, over 3,000 people struggle every day with epilepsy.

Epilepsy is often considered an "invisible disease" for society, not least because it can be controlled with medication. However, this is just part of the picture.

Access to appropriate treatment makes the whole difference in quality of life and ability to contribute to society.

According to the International Bureau for Epilepsy, 40% of people suffering from epilepsy in Europe do not receive treatment that would allow them to live without seizures.

This is why it is necessary to improve early diagnosis and access to appropriate treatment. The question is how do we do this?

Part of the response is to take steps to reduce and eventually eliminate the stigma associated with the disease. Disseminating information is key for this purpose – information to patients, health professionals and the general population.

Better knowledge, awareness and acceptance of epilepsy would help to encourage patients to seek diagnosis and treatment.

Plus, we can take steps to minimise the burden of the disease on patients, by ensuring the best possible treatment to everybody suffering from epilepsy.

To achieve this, we need to encourage all relevant actors to engage in this process at national, regional, local – and European level.

As regards action at EU level, one clear step forward is to invest in research to understand better why epilepsy develops, and how it can be addressed.

This is why the European Commission has been supporting research on epilepsy. The Commission has invested more than €30 million euros from 2007 to 2010 on epilepsy related research.

One thing is to improve the knowledge on epilepsy through research. Another is to act on that knowledge and provide the best possible treatment to all citizens who need it.

This is a challenge that health systems across Europe are faced with, not only for epilepsy, but for each and every chronic disease. In this regard, epilepsy is perhaps a model example – a disease which usually requires lifelong medication and frequent medical visits.

This is why national health systems need to look very carefully at how to ensure their financial sustainability in the long term; so that they are able to provide care to all citizens suffering from epilepsy and other chronic diseases for generations to come.

This is particularly important as the ageing of the population brings with it growing demand for treatment of a variety of chronic diseases.

It is in this context that the Health Ministers of all EU countries adopted Council conclusions at the end of 2010 calling for a coherent approach to addressing chronic diseases across the European Union; and for a reflection on how to optimise responses to the chronic disease challenge.

The Commission is currently working on this "reflection" with the Member States, in consultation with stakeholders, to identify and agree a meaningful and forward-looking agenda for action on chronic diseases as a whole.

I would take this opportunity to invite and encourage key stakeholders such as the International Bureau for Epilepsy and the International League against Epilepsy to provide input to this reflection; to ensure that such agenda on chronic diseases is relevant and useful to you.

Altogether, the Ministers for Health of the EU have already defined in their Council Conclusions four areas on which work on chronic diseases should focus:

The first area is health promotion and prevention. Many chronic conditions are preventable by taking action on risk factors and determinants. Unfortunately, epilepsy is not preventable as such. There is however scope for secondary prevention of the effects of the disease – after it has been diagnosed.

The second area is healthcare. Addressing the chronic diseases challenge requires major adjustments to secure early interventions, secondary prevention and treatment to all by achieving greater efficiency in the way health systems operate. We need to be more proactive in exploiting the potential of new technologies and eHealth in this respect.

The third area is research. We need targeted, applied research on effective prevention, early diagnosis, intervention and care models.

And the fourth and final area is information. We need to base our actions on a solid understanding of chronic diseases, and on effective prevention approaches.

Turning back to epilepsy, I am pleased that the European Parliament is committed to improving prevention, care and quality of life for those who suffer from this condition. I fully share the European Parliament's concern.

The Declaration of the European Parliament on Epilepsy, adopted last September, calls on the Council and the Commission to encourage research and innovation on epilepsy. This is precisely what the European Commission is doing by financing research on epilepsy.

I endorse the Declaration's call on the Member States to ensure equal quality of life for people living with epilepsy including in education, employment, transport and public healthcare. This is something that national governments can – and should – deliver.

At European level, I believe we can add value to national government's work by addressing chronic diseases – as a whole - as a cross-cutting priority. This is why we focus on issues that affect many chronic diseases such as prevention and early diagnosis, or cost-efficiency of care.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I close, I would like to pay tribute to the important work and commitment of national epilepsy associations, such as the Caritas Malta Epilepsy Association, to increase knowledge about epilepsy and reduce the stigma associated with it.

People with epilepsy may find it difficult to obtain employment because of fears and misconceptions about the disorder. They may also face other barriers such as coping with the cognitive effects of medication.

There is no easy solution. I am however persuaded that better public awareness and improved treatments for epilepsy can help to significantly reduce these problems.

Epilepsy organisations play a key role in informing the public and in stimulating research on how epilepsy affects cognition and mood, which can help overcome the stigma of epilepsy and, in turn, increase participation in society for those suffering from this condition.

Today's meeting will help spread some of the good practices and develop proposals to improve the health and quality of life of those living with epilepsy.

You have my support in your efforts towards this end.

Thank you.

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