



fighting heart disease  
and stroke  
european heart network



Brussels, 26 September 2019

Dear Ms Kyriakides,

On the occasion of World Heart Day, celebrated world-wide on 29 September, the European Heart Network (EHN) and the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) take the opportunity to bring to your attention the immense burden of cardiovascular disease (CVD) in the European Union.

Our two organisations represent cardiovascular patients and health professionals in Europe. We work to prevent avoidable deaths and disease and to ensure the best possible treatment is available for the **49 million people who live with CVD** in the EU.

**Cardiovascular disease<sup>1</sup>, mainly heart disease and stroke, is the leading cause of death in the EU.** According to the most recent data from *Eurostat*<sup>1</sup>, more than **1.8 million people** die every year from these diseases (in comparison, 1.3 million people die from all cancers combined every year). A large proportion of these deaths are premature (before age 65), with 24% of the premature deaths among men and 17% of premature deaths among women.

Beyond the human burden, CVD represents a significant financial burden, costing the EU economy an estimated **€210 billion a year**.<sup>2</sup>

**Geographical inequalities** are significant and persistent in CVD: death rates from both heart disease and stroke are generally **higher in Central and Eastern Europe** than in Northern, Southern and Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> But even in the most affluent countries cardiovascular disease is a major health threat with the highest mortality.

While the past 50 years have witnessed significant drops in mortality from CVD, **recent trends** show a slowdown in CVD mortality rate, not least in young people, and there is growing concern that this rate may begin to increase again. This is alarming, and if not addressed with vigour, the EU could see a reverse in the gains in life expectancy that it has achieved over the past decades.<sup>4</sup>

The changing profile of CVD is of particular concern. Survival from heart attacks and strokes has led to an increasing population living with incapacitating chronic diseases, such as heart failure and vascular dementia. In older people, CVD commonly co-exists with other diseases leading to multi-morbidities, a further challenge while seeking to assess and treat patients.

Yet CVD does not receive the attention that EU policy makers reserve for other conditions, nor does it receive sufficient EU research funding compared to other diseases.

<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/product/-/asset\\_publisher/VWJkHuaYvLIN/content/DDN-20190716-1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/product/-/asset_publisher/VWJkHuaYvLIN/content/DDN-20190716-1)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ehnheart.org/cvd-statistics/cvd-statistics-2017.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ehnheart.org/cvd-statistics/cvd-statistics-2017.html> and <https://www.escardio.org/Research/ESC-Atlas-of-cardiology>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/trends-in-life-expectancy-in-eu-and-other-oecd-countries\\_223159ab-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/trends-in-life-expectancy-in-eu-and-other-oecd-countries_223159ab-en)

We are concerned that this may be due to a wrong perception of the human, economic and societal burden of cardiovascular diseases. Sadly, such misperception and lack of policy focus on CVD affect millions of patients and their families.

In your mission letter, you are asked to put forward a plan to beat cancer. Cancer is a very major burden, and we welcome such strong commitment at EU level for a plan to fight it. We believe that the same imperatives are at play with respect to heart diseases, strokes and, indeed, all cardiovascular diseases. Therefore, we call upon you to develop a plan to beat EU's leading cause of death. A dedicated EU plan will give impetus to prevention of and innovation for diagnosing and treating cardiovascular diseases.

We are working on a blueprint for such an EU plan. It will be ready before the end of this year. We look forward to welcoming you to its launch and discussing practical next steps with you.

We congratulate you on your nomination as Commissioner-designate for Health for 2019-2024 and look forward to working closely with you in the fight against cardiovascular disease.

Yours sincerely,

Floris Italianer  
*President, European Heart Network*

Professor Barbara Casadei, FESC  
*President, European Society of Cardiology*

**About the EHN**

The European Heart Network (EHN) is a Brussels-based alliance of foundations and associations dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke and supporting patients throughout Europe.

The EHN plays a leading role in the prevention and reduction of cardiovascular diseases, in particular heart disease and stroke, through advocacy, networking, capacity-building, patient support, and research so that they are no longer a major cause of premature death and disability throughout Europe.

[www.ehnheart.org](http://www.ehnheart.org)

**About the ESC**

The European Society of Cardiology brings together health care professionals from more than 150 countries, working to advance cardiovascular medicine and help people lead longer, healthier lives.

[www.escardio.org](http://www.escardio.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Also referred to as diseases of the circulatory system.