

PEN HEARS FROM THE EUROPEAN AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF CARDIOLOGY (ESC) ABOUT THE SUCCESSES OF THE FIRST EVER CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH WEEK HELD IN NOVEMBER 2013

Centre stage CVD

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the number one killer in Europe, claiming 5,000 lives each day, yet there is no dedicated policy at EU level. To encourage EU policy makers to make the EU a force for protecting and promoting cardiovascular health, the MEP Heart Group in the European Parliament organised a unique event; Cardiovascular Health Week. The initiative was marked by the unprecedented declaration by the EU Commissioner for Health, Tonio Borg, in favour of a dedicated EU strategy for CVD.

The first ever Cardiovascular Health Week took place in the European Parliament in Brussels in early November 2013, with awareness raising activities around the theme 'Mind Your Heart – for a Heart Healthy Europe'.

The initiative was organised by the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) Heart Group, and was co-chaired by Linda McAvan MEP (S&D, UK) and Antonyia Parvanova MEP (ALDE, BG) under the auspices of the European Parliament, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and with the support of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and the European Heart Network (EHN).

The event was successfully far-reaching. Over 80 MEPs from across the EU and from all political groups took part in the various activities

Cardiovascular Health Week was marked by the unprecedented declaration by the EU Commissioner for Health, Tonio Borg



and it is estimated that almost 120,000 people were reached by 'heart healthy' messages on social media.

A strategy just for CVD

Importantly, the initiative was also marked by the unprecedented declaration by the EU Commissioner for Health, Tonio Borg, in favour of raising cardiovascular disease higher on the EU political agenda. He said: "Until now, the general strategy has been to fight the risk factors in general and not a specific disease, but I do not exclude that if the current trends continue, we could have a strategy just for cardiovascular disease."

This is a major step forward in addressing the burden of cardiovascular disease. Indeed, a specific EU strategy could open the way for pan-European screening, a more extensive and co-ordinated support for cardiovascular research and the creation of a central European CVD registry allowing for comparable information on risk factors, incidence, prevalence and management of CVD.

Far-reaching initiative

Information on the Cardiovascular Health Week was included on the websites of MEPs, of the European Commission and of the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU.

In terms of press coverage, articles were published in two of the main Brussels-based media as well as several national media. Scientific publications also widely covered the initiative, including the *European Heart Journal* (the second internationally most read journal on cardiovascular medicine).

MEPs and social media mixed particularly well around the initiative. Over 80 MEPs took part in the activities run within the framework of the Cardiovascular Health Week. Notable participants included: Martin Schulz MEP, current President of the European Parliament (EP) and runner-up for the Presidency of the European Commission; former EP President Jerzy Buzek MEP; the current chair of the EP Health Committee, Matthias Groote MEP; as well as the Committee's former chairs Karl-Heinz Florenz MEP and Miroslav Ouzky MEP.

Many actively displayed their engagement on Twitter and Facebook. It is estimated that almost 120,000 people were reached through Twitter alone.

Saluting the initiative, Professor Panagiotis Vardas, President of the ESC, said: "This is the first time the European Parliament has dedicated a week to cardiovascular disease. As a medical doctor, I see this high level engagement of EU policy makers as a major contribution in striving for optimal prevention and treatment. These will fall short if they are not supported by a strong political commitment."

Number one killer

Despite the overall decline of heart disease mortality in the past 30 years, CVD remains the number one killer in the EU, causing 1.9 million deaths here every year and over four million deaths in Europe generally. Worryingly, recent projections indicate that major CVD risk factors – tobacco, alcohol, poor diet, and physical inactivity, obesity and diabetes – as well as the ageing of the population, will lead to an increase in CVD prevalence over the next 20 years under *status quo* prevention and treatment trends.

By 2030, it is projected that around 70 million Europeans will have died from CVD. Yet, up to 80% of premature CVD deaths are avoidable through prevention policies and early detection and the management of risk factors.

What is more, in times of economic crisis, CVD is estimated to cost the EU economy €196bn a year. Around 54% of this is due to healthcare costs, 24% due to productivity losses, and 22% due to the informal care of people with CVD. Healthcare expenditure on CVD varies from 4% in Luxembourg to 17% in Estonia, Latvia and Poland.

Professor Panagiotis Vardas, President of the ESC



The burden of CVD is also extremely uneven in the EU. Death rates from coronary heart disease are generally higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Northern, Southern and Western Europe. Death rates from stroke are equally many times higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Northern, Southern and Western Europe.

CV health in MEP's agenda

In anticipation of the European Parliament elections in May 2014, MEPs were encouraged to show their support with a 'Pledge for Cardiovascular Health', which commits them to consider the impact of cardiovascular health when voting on EU legislation and support national strategies to promote cardiovascular health. MEPs were invited to include the pledge in their election manifesto. Photo opportunities with the pledge were available for MEPs to make a visual endorsement.

Cardiovascular Health Week began with an Opening Ceremony attended by high level keynote speakers including the Health Commissioner Tonio Borg, Lithuanian Minister of Health Dr Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis and Dr Roberto Bertollini, chief scientist and World Health Organization representative to the EU.

During the week, MEP Heart Group meetings were held with European experts to discuss pressing issues related to cardiovascular health. Other activities included cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training, free cardio fitness classes in the European Parliament Sports Centre, and heart healthy meals in the main European Parliament restaurant.

In addition, a cardiovascular screening exercise run by professional nurses allowed MEPs to have their blood pressure and cholesterol measured. These measurements taken together with other risk factors can predict the ten year risk of dying from CVD. The MEPs also received advice on what constitutes a heart healthy lifestyle.

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