Simple ways to save lives and money

In your special report on European voice, which described the economic challenge represented by the ageing population in Europe, you briefly mentioned that life expectancy in the EU has improved markedly in recent years and that we need to turn our attention to preventive aspects of healthcare as one of the solutions to the problem of healthy and healthy ageing ("Counting the cost of a healthy society", 4 September). Both these points need to be elaborated further.

Indeed, non-communicable diseases—a group of conditions that includes cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, kidney and liver diseases, diabetes mellitus, chronic respiratory disease and musculoskeletal conditions—remain the leading cause of death in Europe, accounting for 69% of all deaths and 77% of the disease burden in the World Health Organization’s European region.

This means that, while the United Kingdom could deal with the costs of wealth per person compared to the rest of the world, prevention of these diseases of high quality of life and increase in life expectancy do not necessarily correspond to an increase in the cost of healthcare.

In developed regions, 28% of DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) are indicated by the WHO as “the sum of years of potential life lost due to premature mortality, disability and the years of life lost due to disability.”

It is these risk factors that are creating the chronic diseases.

These risk factors have been clearly identified by the scientific community as tobacco smoking, alcohol, indebtedness, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity. This figure reaches 52% if obesity and overweight are included. We would like to underline the need to address these risk factors through simple and cheap interventions that would immediately result in a significant reduction in the prevalence of these risk factors and, consequently, in an even more significant cut of healthcare spending.

Unfortunately, only 3% of Europe’s expenditure on health is dedicated to prevention and is not being spent on treatment.

It is laudable that the EU puts a lot of emphasis on keeping young people healthy later in life to keep them in the workforce. But it is not enough to be more reasonable and cost-efficient to put even greater effort into reducing these risk factors so that people can live longer free of avoidable diseases.

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