



EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg Speaks at the launch of the 4th European Epilepsy Day

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**Mr Mitchell, Honourable Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure to be here this evening to say a few words on the occasion of the 4th European Epilepsy Day. I am grateful to Epilepsy Advocacy Europe for inviting me to participate.

I applaud the choice of theme for this year's event – 'Epilepsy is more than seizures' – which draws attention to the wider challenge that the millions of Europeans with epilepsy face beyond the disease itself. These challenges extend to social and labour implications, which need to be addressed.

Addressing epilepsy is primarily a matter under the responsibility of each Member State. This being said, the European Commission is keen to complement and support national activities where it can. Let me mention some examples.

Epilepsy is a life-long chronic disease. Over recent years, chronic diseases have emerged as an important priority of EU-health policy. The Commission, Member States and stakeholders have recently concluded a reflection process on the potential for EU action to address chronic diseases.

An important step in this initiative will be the forthcoming EU summit on chronic diseases in Brussels on 3 and 4 April. The conference will bring together key stakeholders including policy makers, national administrations, health professionals, civil society and industry to shape a set of recommendations for action to tackle the medical, social and economic burden of chronic diseases in the European Union. Let me take this opportunity to encourage you to participate in this conference and to contribute in the discussions.

Stakeholders are also encouraged to organise side-events at the conference which could offer you a platform to give greater visibility to the particular challenges faced by people with epilepsy.

I should also mention that the European Commission has just launched last month a Joint Action on chronic diseases, supported by the EU Health Programme. This action aims to identify best practices in disease prevention and management which, again, may contribute to progress in relation to epilepsy.

Turning to the social aspects of the disease, people with epilepsy often experience difficulties, for example in the context of education or employment. Worse, many suffer from stigmatisation and discrimination. It is common for people with epilepsy to feel that they have to hide their disease, which often results in withdrawal from social life and depression. Indeed the social stigma can pose a greater challenge to patients than the disease itself.

To address the issue of discrimination and stigmatisation of people

with diseases, I am convening another conference in Brussels, on 18 March entitled 'Health in Europe – making it fairer'. This event will seek to identify ways of improving fairness and equity in health across Europe, and how best to combat health-related discrimination. The conference will build on the obligation of the EU and its Member States to safeguard the rights of citizens with disabilities.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights states that human dignity is inviolable, prohibiting any discrimination on the basis of disability. In addition, the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU requires the Union to combat discrimination based on disability when defining and implementing its policies.

I welcome the participation of Mr Michell in the discussion on discrimination in health, which I organised last October at the Gastein Forum. His contribution was a welcome reminder of how people with epilepsy can sometimes be excluded from society. I am determined to bring such cases to the fore, and your help in highlighting the needs of epilepsy sufferers is of capital importance in raising public profile and awareness.

Moving on, when the European Parliament adopted a declaration on Epilepsy back in 2011, one of its main calls on the EU was to support research on epilepsy. And this is what precisely the European Commission has been doing. Indeed epilepsy research has been a priority throughout the EU 7th Framework Programme for Research, which provided some €100 million from 2006 to 2013 to research aimed at improving understanding of epilepsy and at widening therapeutic options.

In 2013 alone, the Commission undertook a comprehensive effort on epilepsy research with a dedicated budget of €45 million. This resulted in four new projects on new biomarkers for better diagnosis, refined therapeutic approaches including for paediatric epilepsies, and research on the causes of the disease.

Let me mention the EPILEPSIAE project which has developed an intelligent and transportable alarm system which measures the brain activity and is capable of predicting imminent seizures. Similarly, the NEMO project, involving 14 institutions in seven Member States, is developing an effective antiepileptic drug suitable for treatment of seizures in new-born babies.

Finally, Horizon 2020 – the EU's new programme for Research and Innovation was launched in December of last year. There are opportunities under the new programme for more research on epilepsy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I close I would like to pay tribute and encourage the important work of civil society towards increasing knowledge and understanding of epilepsy. I would like again to thank Mr Gay Mitchell for his continued leadership and support for the Epilepsy cause, and also the other members of the "European Advocates for Epilepsy" group within the European Parliament.

Finally, I can assure you of my support in your continued drive to raise awareness about epilepsy among policy makers and across society, and to improve the health and the quality of life of people living with and suffering from this condition.

Thank you.

Website of Commission:

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/borg/index_en.htm