



«Can lifestyle changes deliver a silver bullet to cancer?»

Wednesday, 3 March 2021, from 13:30 to 14:30 hrs

Europe's Beating Cancer Plan is the European Commission's top health priority and one of the flagships with the potential to change our lives. It centres on several different sectors, including tobacco, alcohol, environmental pollution, chemicals, health literacy and vaccinations.

The Kangaroo Group hosted high level speakers from three EU institutions and academics to discuss the measures included in the Cancer Plan's prevention pillar in order to identify and aim to address any potential gaps. The panelists included:

- Irish EPP MEP Deirdre Clune;
- Head of Cabinet for Vice-President of the von der Leyen Commission Margaritis Schinas, Despina Spanou;
- Deputy Director for the National Programme on Oncological Diseases, Directorate-General for Health from Portugal, Nuno Sousa;
- Croatian EPP MEP Tomislav Sokol;
- Toxicologist Thomas Hartung.

The event was hosted by the President of the Kangaroo Group, German EPP MEP Michael Gahler. Opening the session he underlined that European governments will not be able to change peoples' behaviours on their own. The public and private sectors need to take joint responsibility for the success of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and provide viable solutions for Europeans. Citizens should be motivated to choose a healthier lifestyle and diet by promoting policies that encourage exercise and avoidance of substance abuse from alcohol, tobacco and drugs. As these product categories are the main reason for a number of preventable cancers, a positive change in consumer behaviour is more promising than, for example, outright bans or sin taxes.

While the panelists at the event did not agree on the benefits of so-called sin taxes, the majority came to the conclusion that managing harm can be far more productive than simply dictate what people should not do.

MEP Deirdre Clune pointed out that the point of taxes on the likes of alcohol is just as important as a means of signalling to consumers that these products are dangerous, as it is of financially disincentivizing their consumption. She underlined that she welcomes any information to feed into European Parliament's Special Committee on Beating Cancer meeting.

European Commission's **Despina Spanou** highlighted that the most important approach is not to force lifestyle changes on people, but to effect a bottom up change through giving people information and changing their incentives. She identified proper labelling on products as one important measure and underlined that tobacco policies must be the most uncompromising item



of the Plan given that it was the most significant issue and, in particular, because it is an addiction. A lot of education would be necessary in this area also, she said. She also pointed out that, although prevention was important, the cancer treatment measures outlined in the Plan will also be crucial.

MEP Tomislav Sokol identified tobacco as the primary issue of concern, with alcohol, nutrition and obesity being next in line. He praised the EU cancer plan as the first systematic effort to deal with these issues alongside treatment measures, and referenced its highly ambitious policy goals around the reduction in continental tobacco use. He argued that higher taxes on alcohol and tobacco were needed and anticipated backlash from countries in which these industries are an important part of the economy. Raising the issue of harm reduction with respect to tobacco, he pointed out that although the European Court of Justice had ruled the EU Commission's current anti-vape position acceptable, they did say that more research needed to be done in this area and that there is a lot of scientific uncertainty surrounding the efficacy of vaping products. He added that he had requested the European Parliamentary Research Service is conducting a study on vaping which will be out soon.

The representative of the Portuguese Council Presidency, **Nuno Sousa** said he believes that changes in regulation around the marketing of alcohol and foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar will be a key issue. Changes to labelling and the like would also be important as a means of informing consumers, he said. Such changes, according to Sousa, could make a big difference in the market without being overly intrusive on an individual level, making for a much more sustainable change. Specifically, he pointed to regulations on the marketing of tobacco as a model to emulate.

Thomas Hartung brought a scientific perspective to the discussion, suggesting Europe should look tentatively at the use of harm reduction products like e-cigarettes, but cautioned that there is nowhere near enough regulation on these products as of right now. Instead of stigmatising peoples' behaviours, they should be supported in changing their habits towards a more positive lifestyle, by offering them alternatives that reduce risk.

The Q&A session:

Jindřich Vobořil from Institute for Rational Drug Policies (IRAP) pointed to addiction research which indicates there will be great difficulty in achieving the sort of tobacco free society the Cancer Plan outlines without the use of harm reduction products.

Joe Dunne from consumer organisation, Respect Vapers Ireland pointed to the great number of people who have quit smoking through vaping and asked why more wasn't done in the plan to provide for harm reduction.

- Both **Deirdre Clune** and **Tomislav Sokol** suggested that it was a live issue at the parliamentary level but that more research would need to be done.



- **Despina Spanou (European Commission)** and **Nuno Sousa (Portuguese Presidency)** reiterated that the EU rules provide for no distinction between these products and cigarettes.

Damian Sweeney of the New Nicotine Alliance Ireland, a national consumer led organisation, challenged Professor Hartung and his claims about the link between vaping and 'diacetyl/popcorn lung'. Sweeney said that diacetyl harm has never been linked to vaping and said that injuries from vaping were based on US cannabis and tampering cases. Hartung acknowledged that Mr. Sweeney was correct, stating that he had not been able to fully address it in his presentation. However, he pushed back on Sweeney's diacyl point, stating we still did not know about its impact on lungs.

MEP Gahler suggests that sin taxes seem to have backfired with only the poorer communities being hit the most and asked the panelists if this is the right approach. **MEP Clune** said that education is key and underlined that high taxation on alcohol for example is not the only measure but also banning promotions, such as 3 for 1. Taxation is there to prevent consumption and they can be effective, she added.

MEP Gahler also added that the Portuguese Tobacco Control Law encourages risk and harm reduction when it comes to smoking and using alternatives when conventional methods don't work and asked the Council Presidency representative if their response to the Cancer Plan support the Commission's approach of sin taxes or move towards to share the progressive approach included in their national legislation. **Nuno Sousa** replied that their options will be in line with the Commission's recommendations and should not be any leeway provided to vaping or other forms of tobacco consumption.

The event concluded by highlighting that the report conducted by the European Parliament's Special Committee on Beating Cancer will try to address all the potential gaps of the prevention pillar based on the available research. The MEPs sitting on the Committee are hoping for a publication at the end of the summer.