

Launch event for the OECD report “Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU: Spotlight on prevention and early detection”

On 5 February 2024 the European Commission, together with the OECD, launched the first edition of the “Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU” report, one of the milestones of the European Cancer Inequalities Registry. The event was hosted by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), one of the partners of the initiative, welcoming more than 180 participants online.

Elisabete Weiderpass, Director of IARC welcomed the audience stressing the joint commitment at European level to reduce cancer inequalities by harnessing the power of data, and driving meaningful change to make cancer care equitable for all European citizens.

Philippe Roux, acting Director for Public Health, Cancer and Health Security at DG SANTE noted the success of Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan in the past three years outlining as well the progress achieved by the European Cancer Inequalities Registry. With the delivery of the Data Tool, the Country Cancer Profiles and the “Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU” report the initiative completed its first reporting cycle, with more still in store for the coming years.

Francesca Colombo, Head of the Health Division at OECD, provided an in-depth presentation on the insights of the report, outlining the key policies and actions to tackle cancer across the EU27, Norway and Iceland, with a specific focus on addressing preventable risk factors and improving access to screening and early diagnosis. The report shows that over 40% of the cancer burden is from preventable risk factors, more prevalent among lower socioeconomic groups. Although higher participation in screening programmes is linked with better cancer outcomes, only 5 countries have more than 50% participation rates in breast, colorectal and cervical cancer screening programmes. Inclusive approaches to cancer prevention and cancer control policies should be scaled up, including fiscal, regulatory and health systems organisation tools, and initiatives that can be undertaken in primary care, workplaces, and schools. Particular emphasis should be placed on vulnerable groups, to better control cancer, counter inequalities and improve the health and well-being of all Europeans.

The following roundtable discussion focused on tackling cancer through prevention and early detection, ongoing challenges and possible solutions at the EU level. The panel touched on the policy perspective, provided by Philippe Roux (DG SANTE) and Francesca Colombo (OECD), the need for research addressed by Isabelle Soerjomataram (Deputy Branch Head Cancer Surveillance Unit at IARC) and Sandra Caldeira (Head of Unit for Disease prevention at the Joint Research Center), the patient perspective represented by Antonella Cardone (CEO Cancer Patients Europe) and the national perspective provided by Sonja Tomšič, representative of the Institute of Oncology Ljubljana, and Coordinator of the National Cancer Control Programme in Slovenia.

The panel outlined the importance of adopting a comprehensive package of measures on prevention and early detection. Data and research play an important role in helping us understand and eradicate inequalities, as it can inform on targeted and context-specific interventions that can be adopted and help re-direct investments more efficiently. With regards to risk factors such as tobacco or alcohol, it is important to avoid criminalisation of individuals on lifestyle behaviour and leverage on existing tools such as taxation or health warnings. In terms of awareness, it is crucial to involve primary care to address stigma and improve health literacy. It is also important to have patient-centred, accessible and affordable technology to detect cancer early and inform targeted treatments. Best practices at national level can be inspiring for action across the EU. This can include intersectoral collaboration between the health and employment sectors, such as facilitating return to work, as well as supporting health promotion at the workplace especially for screening programs. Education and research sectors can

also cooperate to promote vaccination in schools, and targeted screening information should be adapted to the needs of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities.

There was agreement among participants on the need for a comprehensive set of policies, with a solid evidence-base and targeting all population groups. The need to rebalance healthcare investment to ensure effective returns and limit wasteful spending was also raised.

The event was concluded by Freddie Bray, Branch Head of the Cancer Surveillance at IARC, who congratulated DG SANTE and OECD for the publication of the report. He stressed how we need to rely on data to understand inequalities and how they can be reduced, and that information packaged in a comprehensive and digestible format can point policymakers towards the right direction. He concluded by noting how the Cancer Inequalities Registry has become a key policy instrument to help countries identify areas that need action. It will be important to further expand and define future objectives to help improve cancer prevention and care across Europe.