

ECDC-event for World AIDS Day, 1 December 2009

Aim to increase awareness of the on-going HIV/AIDS epidemic in EU countries

AIDS remains a fatal disease, in Europe just as much as anywhere else in the world. Therefore, I wholeheartedly welcome the World AIDS Day as an important occasion to renew our commitment for awareness rising, protection and solidarity within the EU and with other parts of the world.

I just returned from the EU-ACP meeting in Angola. There - as most of the local and international organisations working in post-war Angola agree, the scourge of HIV/AIDS represents Angola's single-greatest challenge to recovery. It is very hard to obtain reliable data and even harder to obtain appropriate care.

On the sidelines of the World Aids Day, the 18th session of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly will approve a formal text to underline the need for working together in the fight against aids.

In Europe, in the past years the possibilities to survive also with HIV have improved, thanks to better therapies and treatments. But we have by no means beaten this virus. It continues to spread. The number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the EU and its neighboring countries has risen between 2001-2007 from 1,2 Mio to 2,2 Mio people. In 2007 alone 50.000 new cases were diagnosed. The European Union and its neighbouring countries now face the threat of a 'new epidemic'. Parts of Europe have the fastest rate of new HIV/AIDS cases in the world. Latest figures released recently by UNAIDS confirmed that the numbers of new infections are increasing throughout the 27 EU Member States and in its east European neighbours. The transmission pattern is also changing. While sexually transmitted infections remain predominant in some parts of the European Continent many of the rapid rises in infections are due to intravenous drug users. The legislative framework and standards for social and health services for people affected by HIV/AIDS in Europe differ considerably between countries. Access to services and medical treatment, as well as to prevention or harm reduction measures, is often limited.

We must not stop our efforts to fight against this disease. While huge efforts are made in the research field to find new therapies, treatments and eventually even a cure we also must increase our efforts in the field of information to people to prevent them from catching HIV and, first and foremost to show solidarity and support to sufferers. I want to underline that a broad protection of human rights in every aspect of the fight against HIV is of the utmost importance. The fear of discrimination and stigmatization, a lack of access to HIV tests and HIV therapies are some of the main reasons for delayed diagnoses or starts of therapies. Statistics show that approximately 30% of those infected are not aware of their infection and thus oblivious to the need for treatment and to the danger of transmitting it even further.

By outcasting HIV carriers we thus increase the spread of the virus even more. Only a few of the 53 countries in Europe implement measures against stigmatization and discrimination and for the protection of human rights. There is a huge demand for immediate action. It is a question of solidarity whether we can provide a good life also to those suffering from HIV/AIDS – a question of solidarity from people to people but also between countries. If we share our knowledge and our resources we stand a much better chance to fight this disease.

Today, after many years of negotiations and set backs, the Lisbon Treaty eventually enters into force. It will provide a much stronger democratic basis for the EU and the European

integration process. While health issues remain in the national competence, the EU's possibilities regarding cross border health issues and also infectious diseases are strengthened. E.g.:

- Article 35 strengthens the right to health care: *"Everyone has the right of access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices. A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all the Union's policies and activities."*

introduction of provisions on

- the encouragement of "cooperation between the Member States to improve the complementarity of their health services in cross-border areas" (Article 168(2) TFEU)
- the adoption of "measures setting high standards of quality for medicinal products and devices for medical use" (Article 168(4)(c) TFEU)

But together with the Lisbon Treaty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights enters into force, too. It becomes binding for most EU member states.

We all know that in Europe homosexual men constitute one of the risk groups for HIV infection. And they also constitute a group that is still discriminated in many countries in Europe. For them it is particularly hard to live with the infection or the disease. Through the Lisbon Treaty, the Charter for Fundamental Rights now offers new possibilities for them to fight for their – fundamental - rights and to overcome discrimination.

Last year the European Parliament welcomed a resolution calling for effective measures in the public health sector in order to improve the early detection of HIV and to improve access to HIV tests, also anonymous ones, and therapies. We also asked the Commission to develop a strategy that helps to minimize the risks related to HIV and to support the fight against the virus.

Therefore I very much welcome that in October this year the Commission presented its strategy on the fight against HIV/AIDS for 2009-2013. The focus is on HIV prevention and testing as well as on risk groups and regions. It is important that we are taking the leadership in tackling HIV at times of economic crisis, particularly with regard to prevent health inequalities in the EU and neighboring countries widening further.

The ENVI will have a closer look at the proposal and perhaps organize an exchange of views or present an opinion, e.g. with further ideas or improvements.

The Parliament also called on the member states, and I can only reiterate this call, to pass effective legislation prohibiting the discrimination of HIV/AIDS carriers, including potential restriction to their freedom of movement. Member states, being responsible for health issues, also have to intensify information and awareness campaigns on prevention, testing possibilities and HIV/AIDS treatments. The EU Commission should support these efforts financially as well as politically.

With regard to the upcoming hearings of the candidates for the new Commission we will also see to it that the new commissioner takes this issue as seriously as the current one did in the past year, Mrs Vassiliou who is also present tonight. During the past years the EU has stepped up its political engagement, worked towards better inclusion of the civil society, centralized the operative part of HIV/AIDS control via the ECDC, increased the possibilities for access to affordable anti-retroviral drugs, financed prevention projects and programs and augmented research investments as well as close cooperation across borders.

The ENVI currently has a number of medical product related issues on his agenda, e.g. the problem of falsified medical products, patient information or pharmacovigilance. They all bare very concrete links to HIV/AIDS – e.g. it is very important that the medical products used in therapies and treatments consist indeed of the active substances indicated, that they are not falsified for profit reasons but checked and controlled along the entire supply chain. Patients must also be provided with objective information about medical products, their expected and actual effects, alternatives etc.. All these directives and regulations are part of the greater aim to improve health care in Europe, also concerning HIV/AIDS.

The upcoming Spanish EU presidency has already indicated that it wants to put a number of health related issues on the agenda and to conclude the work on the current dossiers. We will certainly welcome all information and statements from your side into our work. There are also a number of other activities in the pipeline, e.g. the Commission has promised to present a new Communication on Global Health Security: European Union Contribution" soon and the ENVI Committee will have also follow closely the "Operation of the Health Programme 2008-2013 - work of the Executive Agency for Health and Consumers" The financial envelope for the Second Health Programme is EUR 321.5 million for the period from 2008 to 2013. The Programme is implemented by means of annual work plans which set out priority areas and the funding criteria. The Parliament will be kept abreast on the implementation of the 2008-2013 Health Programme.

There are numerous ways and means for the EU to increase awareness, protection and solidarity in relation to HIV/AIDS. We will strive to combine our efforts to fight the virus on all fronts, not only via medical research but also with solidarity within our societies.

Last but not least I also want to give my respect and thanks to those of you, representing civil society organizations that help dealing with this disease. The contribution and the difference you make in the lives of those infected with HIV/AIDS and also to their families are invaluable. Without the engagement from the civil society, strategies are only texts and letters but you fill them with life, you make them happen!