

Speech of Prof Georgs Andrejevs

"European Symposium Myeloma Waldenstroem"

No Policy Without Patients

Maastricht, October 30th, 2008

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank the organizers for this conference and for their very kind invitation. Also, I would like to extend my very warm greetings to all of today's participants discussing "No policy without patients" at this event.

As Member of the European Parliament and medical doctor, I have been a strong advocate not only for the provision of equal standards in medical care for all European citizens but also a strong supporter of various patient groups and patient organizations.

As many of you already know, the European Parliament as a whole is quite often involved in solving different medical and health care problems. In spite of the fact that the delivery of health services lies primarily within the competence of the Member States, the EU, adhering to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in accordance with Article 152 of the EU Treaty, has a responsibility where necessary to act so as to support Member States to co-operate and to co-ordinate their activities.

The mentioned Article 152 of the Treaty obliges the EU to ensure a high level of human health protection in all EU policies. Community action must complement national policies and must be aimed at improving public health, preventing human illnesses as well as obviating sources of dangers for health. The Treaty also calls on the Community to encourage and support co-operation between the Member States who need to co-ordinate their health policies and programs. All this puts health as a horizontal issue.

At the same time, the European Union has a limited mandate to adopt a common public health policy whilst at all times respecting the right of Member States to adopt national measures for organisation and delivery of health services.

On this background we face inequalities in health in Europe. The way societies organise, finance, manage and deliver health services has a strong impact on the performance of health systems. Tackling the broad health determinants and ensuring that health systems meet citizens' needs is primarily a matter for national and regional authorities.

Let me assure you that I want a European Union where the Community is about fostering convergence to ensure a high level of well-being, including health, across Europe. But a gap exists.

I would like to mention that it was in the context of the UK Presidency in 2005 were the issue of health

inequalities within the EU was first raised - an issue very close to my heart.

Working towards closing this gap has ever since been one of the main objectives of the European Parliament when addressing health policy and it has tried to pursue this objective systematically in all policies.

As you may be aware, the European Parliament has established several of so called inter-groups or Groups for specific topics to address these topics and raise awareness for them. Many of these Groups are dealing with health subjects.

These Groups are created under the patronage of Members with the purpose to offer all interested parliamentarians an opportunity to meet with representatives from different NGOs, including Patient Groups, Commission representatives and other stakeholders to discuss issues, to give insight and to form their opinions on different subjects. Patient groups, in particular, are welcomed and encouraged to participate and to share their opinions and experiences with Parliamentarians in the context of these Groups. In many instances, their input and their insight was an invaluable contribution to better legislation for our citizens.

There are several examples where Patient Groups have made important contributions to Parliament's work. As a result of the discussions within the above mentioned Groups, several initiatives have come to light. Despite its limitations in the field of health, the European Parliament has shown leadership and initiated several Resolutions

with a view to put so called major diseases on its health agenda.

I would like to mention: the Resolution on tackling Cardio Vascular Diseases, the Resolution on combating cancer in the enlarged European Union, the Resolution on Influenza Pandemic or the very successful Written Declaration on Diabetes which received 422 signatures out of 785 Deputies.

I think it is more than justified to formulate Resolutions to tackle "individual" diseases, when you are aware of estimates like this one: Today the European Union has population of 450 million, and of these, every third citizen will develop cancer during their life. This outlook is bad not merely for the patients and their families but this devastating trend - which WHO calls an epidemic - is bringing with it ever larger social, financial and political problems, even undermining the competitiveness of the European Union in the global economy.

Please allow me to quote a survey conducted by Eurostat in January 2008 in all 27 Member States, entitled "Citizens' views of the European Parliament: perceptions, knowledge and expectations" where 39% of all people answered that they would like to see improvement of consumer and public health protection given a priority status.

When putting all of this together, it is still my firm believe that all of us must work even more closely together and become even more determined political

advocates in the fight against diseases and to keep asking our governments to allocate the necessary resources to it. Our health and survival depends on this commitment.

In general I see the European Union's tasks in promoting convergence and raising standards. The present health inequalities should not be considered and perceived as a fact of life, the EU should continue to actively promote better health for everybody by using those methods it has available - namely: support for Member States actions, coordination instruments, better data collection, recommendations and exchange of best practices.

Having said this, as politicians we have a vital role to play in galvanising this Europe's fight, but politicians, unfortunately, often only respond to pressure from patients and the public. In the end, therefore, it is also up you, to the patient's community as a whole: patients and their health care professionals to make their legitimate case and speak with a united voice.

And extend a little pressure on us politicians.

Thank You!