Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Borg delivers speech on diabetes

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends a meeting of the EU Diabetes Working Group at the European Parliament

Brussels, Belgium, 12 November 2013
Honourable Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the EU Diabetes Working Group, and in particular Ms Matias, for inviting me here today to discuss the very serious issue of diabetes – a disease in which I take a keen interest.

I fully share the European Parliament's concern about the alarming increase in diabetes – mostly in type II diabetes – in Europe and worldwide.

I also fully support the goals of the European Parliament Resolution of March 2012 on addressing the EU diabetes epidemic; which now need to be implemented across Member States, notably thorough National Diabetes Plans.
The good news is that type II diabetes is largely preventable. It is linked to nutrition and physical activity – two of the common risk factors which play a role in many chronic diseases.

Indeed, according to the World Health Organization 44% of the global diabetes burden is attributable to overweight and obesity, and 27% to physical inactivity.

More than half of the adult population in the European Union is overweight or obese.

The situation for children is equally worrying. In the EU, one in three children aged 6 to 9 years is overweight or obese. This is a considerable increase from 2008 – just five years ago – when the figure was one in four children.

And according to the most conservative estimate, from the 'International Association for the Study of Obesity', more than 20 000 obese children in the EU now have type II diabetes, while over 400 000 have impaired glucose tolerance.

These figures illustrate vividly why it is so important to invest in preventing diabetes from an early age.
The Commission, in partnership with Member States and stakeholders, has a strong record of addressing nutrition and physical activity.

We work with stakeholders through the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, generating commitments for action to address obesity.

I should add that the International Diabetes Federation is an active member of the Platform.

The European Commission, together with the Member States, is now shaping a new Action Plan on childhood obesity. If we succeed in reducing childhood obesity now, we will prevent many thousands of children from developing diabetes II later in life.

Taking action to address the determinants of diabetes is an important part of our response to diabetes in the long run.

But our action does not stop here. Prevention is not enough. We also need to support people living with diabetes today.
And while many of the decisions on how health systems respond to the diabetes epidemic fall to Member States, there are areas where the EU can add value to support and underpin national activities.

Next month at the Health Council, I will be discussing with Health Ministers the potential for further EU added-value action on the prevention, care, research and information on chronic diseases.

This follows from a thorough reflection process on chronic diseases with Member States and stakeholders which we have carried out.

Early next year, I will launch a Joint Action with Member States on chronic diseases, under the EU Health Programme, to support Member States in their efforts to improve prevention and management of chronic conditions.

I am pleased to inform you that this Joint action will single out work on diabetes - and on no other disease.

In this context, work on the barriers to prevention, screening and treatment of diabetes will be developed over the next three years.
This work will improve cooperation among Member States regarding actions on diabetes, and help develop common guidance, for example on training of health professionals or on improving literacy to empower people with diabetes.

In this context, we will support Member States' National Diabetes plans – this is an important issue stressed in the Parliament Resolution – by fostering the exchange of good practices and by producing guidelines on the essential elements of such Diabetes Plans (which Member States then can adapt to their circumstances).

In addition, thanks to the European Parliament, the Commission services are right now shaping a pilot project for developing and implementing successful prevention strategies for type II diabetes.

All this is new work developed in the past few months. As you know, however, we are not starting from scratch.

Through the Health Programme, we have supported a number of projects specifically on diabetes – including work on good practice on paediatric and adolescent diabetes, and on guidelines and training standards for diabetes prevention, and diabetes information and reporting.
The Commission has also financed many research projects on diabetes and obesity. In fact, during the past 6 years of the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, the Commission has invested €270 million on obesity and diabetes related research.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The increasing burden of diabetes calls for a serious and sustained debate on how we can adapt our health policies, improve our health and social systems and increase public awareness of the challenge ahead.

To take this forward, I will convene an EU summit on chronic diseases in April next year. This will review the results of EU action so far, and discuss how and where further EU action can support Member States, stakeholders and citizens.

Diabetes remains at the very centre of this debate, and I hope diabetes stakeholders will play a strong and active role as we take forward action on chronic diseases over the years to come.
Thank you for your attention and for your continued support.