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Commissioner Tonio Borg delivers a speech at the launch of the European Cancer Patients' Bill of Rights

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Commissioner Tonio Borg speaks at the launch of the *European Cancer Patients' Bill of Rights*.

European Parliament - Strasbourg, 4 February 2014.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to join the European Cancer Concord, and all of you today, at the launch of the European Cancer Patients' Bill of Rights, which I very much welcome.

And what better day to do so than on World Cancer Day – a day which draws world attention to cancer, and the need to pursue our efforts to improve the lives of all those who live with cancer.

This is why we are here: to focus on patients' concerns, needs, dignity; on patients' rights.

While patients' rights are expressed differently across the European Union, a great deal has been achieved in this area, and in particular at European level.

Allow me to highlight how European initiatives can make a real and positive difference to Patients' Rights across the European Union.

Let me start with access: access to the best possible treatment and a greater choice of healthcare; or as your Bill stresses: optimal and timely access to specialized care.

The Directive on Patients' Rights in Cross-border Healthcare which entered into force in October of last year sets out citizens' rights to go to another EU country for treatment and to obtain reimbursement for such treatment.

These principles are not new. They have been set down by the Court of Justice over the last fifteen years and the Directive codifies them.

The Directive seeks to help patients exercise their rights to choose healthcare in another Member State in practise: it provides for more transparency, more information to patients.

I believe this truly opens the door to greater choice for patients and I very much look forward to seeing the law become reality for patients. The Commission will carefully monitor the implementation of the Directive in this regard.

When it comes to outcomes in cancer related care, there are some encouraging news.

EUROCARE – the largest co-operative study of population-based cancer survival in Europe – has recently shown that in general, cancer survival rates have steadily increased over recent years across Europe.

(For example, 5-year survival-rates are significantly higher for patients diagnosed between 2005 and 2007 than for patients diagnosed between 1999 and 2001.)

But when you look across Europe, access and outcomes still vary considerably across regions and across national borders.

The Commission is helping Member States address these inequalities, by fostering co-operation across Europe on cancer prevention and care, through Joint Actions under the EU Health programme.

In this context, the Commission assisted Member States in setting up and implementing National Cancer Control Plans. Today, 24 out of the 28 Member States have adopted National Cancer Plans, compared to just 17 in 2009.

Let me also mention quality assurance, where the Commission is updating the breast cancer guidelines and linking them to a voluntary system of accreditation for breast cancer services.

This voluntary scheme – the first of its kind in the EU – seeks to place the focus firmly on the patient and cover all aspects of diagnosis and care, from screening to the management of recurrence.

Moving on, the right for the patient to receive accurate information and to be actively associated in care is the very first right that your Bill defends. I could not agree more.

Information is key to enable the patient to play an active role in his or her treatment rather than just being a passive recipient.

With this in mind, the Commission has begun a mapping exercise on patient empowerment initiatives across the European Union, for which the results are expected this autumn.

Patients will also benefit from comparable data through the establishment of a common European Cancer Information System.

This new system will give cancer information a solid and sustainable basis for the future and will also provide a valuable resource for research on cancer, fostering greater understanding of inequalities and their causes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me take this opportunity to assure you that Cancer is very high on the European agenda.

Next month, the Commission will launch a new Joint Action on Comprehensive Cancer Control.

This will target both cancer patients and ex-patients by providing a guide on quality improvement in optimal cancer care.

The Joint Action will identify key elements and quality standards for cancer control in Europe; and facilitate and foster stronger cooperation among Member States on how to ensure the best and most comprehensive cancer care.

Member States will benefit from European benchmarks and a roadmap to optimize cancer care, spanning cancer prevention initiatives right through to palliative care.

Cancer is an issue which affects all of us, directly or indirectly at some point in our lives. It touches our core values – equity, dignity and respect. Promoting equity and combatting discrimination in health is one of my key priorities.

Next month – on 18 March – I will host a conference in Brussels, entitled "Health in Europe, making it fairer" to discuss how we can collectively improve fairness and equity in health across Europe.

Finally – a word about the initiative being launched today. The European Cancer Concord – which brings together patients and the research community – clearly has an important role to play. I thoroughly applaud your dedication to the cause and your inspirational approach.

The European Bill for Patients' Rights is an ambitious project. I can assure you that your voice and that of patients' organizations is heard and greatly valued within the Commission.

I look forward to continuing to work together with you to improve the lives of cancer patients.

Thank you.