



## TIME TO ACCELERATE: TOGETHER AGAINST CANCER IN BULGARIA AND EUROPE Sofia, Bulgaria – March 19, 2024

An official meeting on the topic "**Together against cancer in Bulgaria and in Europe**" gathered at a round table in the National Assembly on March 19, 2024 the CEO of the European Organization for the Fight against Cancer Mike Morrissey, patient organizations, medical societies, leading doctors, politicians and people's representatives. The event was held under the patronage of Mrs. Rositsa Pandova - Yovkova, MP from PP-DB and member of the Health Commission of the National Assembly. "We need to create strong partnerships and strategies to fight cancer in Bulgaria, because there are 200,000 people with oncological diseases in our country, which is 2.5% of the population, and every year 26,000 people are newly diagnosed. We are the only country in the EU with an upward trend in mortality from cancer," said Ms. Pandova.

The round table was opened by the Deputy Minister of Health Prof. Dr. Mihail Okoliiski with the words: "Bulgaria created its Plan to fight cancer until 2027, presented it in Brussels in 2023, where it was liked by our European partners, but still the Plan is not implemented. It is our hope that the Anti-Cancer Plan will help in the early diagnosis and early intervention of oncological diseases. And this will happen when we start focusing mainly on cancer prevention.

Fortunately, this year the biggest increase in the budget of the Health Fund is for outpatient care and prevention." To the 160 participants in the impressive event, Prof. Vasil Pandov - member of the Health Commission of the National Assembly made a call: "Immediate measures are needed for the prevention of cancer, for the sharp increase in vaccination coverage with the HPV vaccine and the cancers associated with these viruses , as well as for the mass application of DNA tests for the diagnosis of high-risk papillomaviruses for cancer."

Dr. Alexander Simidchiev from the Health Commission of the National Assembly drew attention to the fake news that instills anti-vaccination sentiments. "This is not just fake news, but systematic disinformation aimed at hindering the democratic process in our country. Countries that allow the "noise in the system" to be greater pay with the lives of their citizens. Each of us must prove that life is the ultimate value. Therefore, the health system must firstly prevent cancers, secondly diagnose them early and treat them effectively." People's representative Valentin Tonchev - chairman of the Commission for the direct participation of citizens and interaction with civil society - emphasized the role of civil society in increasing vaccine coverage against oncogenic types of human papilloma viruses (HPV).



Mr. Tonchev pointed out that there is a lack of public information about what the institutions are doing to reverse the trend of increased morbidity and mortality from cancer diseases. "It is the patient organizations that signal us about the problems in the health system, about insufficient reforms or lack of adequate measures. They also reported the lack of funding and patient access to genetic testing for biomarkers of various types of cancer. And these tests are a condition for applying modern targeted therapies in oncology. This year, the NHIF was offered to pay for 12 tumor biomarkers, but in the end they were not included in the framework contract between the Bulgarian Medical Union and the NHIF," announced Mr. Tonchev.

The representative of UNICEF for Bulgaria, Christine Debroyne, drew attention to cervical cancer (CRC): "In a combination of vaccination with early screening and treatment, cervical cancer can be eliminated. However, in Bulgaria, two women die every day from the RMSH - these are the lives of mothers, the childhood of their children." The need to put the fight against cancer on the agenda for politicians in Bulgaria is the high incidence of oncological diseases and the low level of prevention in our country. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Bulgaria. The incidence is 422.4 per 100,000 population, with more than half of all patients dying - 245.33 per 100,000. While in the European Union, with a higher incidence of cancer, the mortality rate is lower - 242.24 per 100,000. These data find their explanation against the background of the large percentage of the population with harmful habits, which are risk factors for cancer - 28.7% is the share of smokers in Bulgaria compared to 18.4% in the EU, as well as the high average alcohol consumption in the age group of 15 years and above - 11.2 liters per year. This speaks of a lack of adequate policies for the prevention of smoking and the use of alcohol. At the same time, only girls aged 10 to 14 have access to HPV vaccination, and vaccine coverage is only 1.5% compared to 90% for Europe. National screening programs for lung cancer and prostate cancer are also lacking, and one third of the target group is screened for breast cancer.

National screening programs for lung cancer and prostate cancer are also lacking, and one third of the target group is screened for breast cancer. The possibilities for modern cancer treatment are also limited due to the limited access of patients to genetic tests for biomarkers, which are the basis of modern anti-cancer therapies. Oncologists emphasized that with these deficits, there is no way to guarantee that every patient will receive quality medical care. What's more, the National Anti-Cancer Plan, drawn up long ago, has not yet come into effect, and the National Cancer Registry has not been maintained for years and will not work at all from 2023. Associate

Professor Dr. Zhelyazko Arabadzhiev - member of the board of the EU Cancer Mission to the European Commission - presented to the audience the role of the Cancer Mission: "To provide opportunities, approaches and solutions to significant health care problems. Thus guaranteeing equal access of citizens to scientific achievements and innovations in the fight against cancer. The Cancer Mission will operate in each EU Member State through a National Hub. The goal is to



improve the lives of more than three million people by 2030 through prevention, treatment and support for those affected by cancer and their families to live longer and better lives."

Mr Mike Morrissey introduced the audience to the European Cancer Manifesto 2024, entitled 'Time to step up: Together against cancer in Europe'. Among the Manifesto's main recommendations for EU cancer policy are:

- to achieve the final elimination of vaccine-preventable oncological diseases, including those related to the human papilloma virus (HPV) and the hepatitis B virus (HBV);
- to conduct more effective policies for the prevention and early detection of cancer
- to solve with adequate measures the problem of the shortage of medical personnel in the field of oncology. The idea is to reach all these goals by using the possibilities of the European Plan to fight Cancer with the corresponding funding and by creating an EU Action Plan to solve the problem of the health workforce shortage.

A key theme of the event and part of the European Cancer Manifesto 2024 is tackling the crisis of the cancer workforce in Europe. "The new European Commission 2024-2029 should draw inspiration from the EU's new commitments on shortages of health products and medicines as a collective effort and set common goals and initiatives to combat the ongoing and growing oncology staffing crisis and the health professions that all EU countries face. There is currently a shortfall of 2 million healthcare professionals in the EU", stressed Mr Mike Morrissey.

In an online tap from Brussels, Mr Matthias Wismar explained that a third of medical professionals are aging and will leave the system within 12 years, and there are not enough young doctors to take their place. "The big problem in health care is that there are 'medical deserts' on the maps of every country, in which there is a lack of medical staff in general and in certain specialties, as well as pharmacies. This explains the large disparities in access to medical care in large cities and in rural areas," explained Mr Wismar. In the second panel of the discussion on "HPV-related cancers and the situation in Bulgaria", the activities of the HPV Coalition for one year of existence were presented.

Dr. Gergana Nikolova emphasizes the problems of general practitioners in vaccine prevention against HPV: "I am faced with anti-vaccine sentiments every day. Paradoxically, the fear of the vaccine is greater than the fear of cancer. Constant information campaigns among parents are needed, because every year some of them have to decide whether to vaccinate their children against HPV".

Dr. Kremena Parmakova from the Ministry of Health emphasized that a third of parents are completely unaware of the risks to their children's health that an HPV infection carries. "And while at home we're wondering how to jump from 1.5% vaccine coverage to at least 19%, in Australia they've already achieved 96% HPV vaccine coverage and no more HPV-related diseases, in Scotland vaccine coverage is 89% , in Sweden - 88%, in Denmark - 82%," said Dr. Parmakova.



Assoc. Yordanka Uzunova from the Bulgarian Pediatric Association drew attention to the training of pediatricians in communication skills and the need for information campaigns among doctors themselves, since the anti-vaccine speech of doctors has the most detrimental effect on vaccination coverage against HPV. The chairman of the National Expert Board on Virology at the Bulgarian Medical Union and member of the HPV Coalition Prof. Radka Argirova introduced the audience to the gold standards in the screening and diagnosis of HPV-related diseases. "After being infected with HPV, it takes years for a precancerous or cancerous disease to develop.

The chairman of the National Expert Board on Virology at the Bulgarian Medical Union and member of the HPV Coalition Prof. Radka Argirova introduced the audience to the gold standards in the screening and diagnosis of HPV-related diseases. "After being infected with HPV, it takes years for a precancerous or cancerous disease to develop. It is precise in this period that we must intervene with secondary prevention - with screening for oncogenic types of HPV. In Bulgaria, however, there is no organized and state-funded screening program against HPV-related diseases. In addition, the smear used for diagnosis has a sensitivity and reliability of 53%. This means that every second result is not correct. Nowadays, the gold standard in screening is a DNA test for HPV infection (HPV PCR test), which is very sensitive, and this test should be administered at least once in 70% of women by the age of 35. And after receiving a positive test, there should be a clear algorithm of action - how to track and treat those infected with high-risk HPV types for cancer, as well as those patients for whom there is a lower risk of cancer," explained Prof. Argirova.

The event ended with a poetic reference by the writer and poet Gergana Turiyska, who read her inspiring poem "Daughters" and a cake with a single candle, which marked one year since the establishment of the HPV Coalition Bulgaria.