



Living Downstream: A personal exploration of cancer and our environment & European 'environmental prevention' policies

Monday, 29th November – 19.30-21.30 European Parliament

Questions on cancer and the environment

This collection of testimonies from cancer patient groups about cancer and the environment has been an initiative from the European Cancer Patient Coalition and the Health and Environment Alliance. These questions were posed and responses compiled in November 2010. Our aim is to begin to understand better the views of patients' groups on the role of environmental contamination in cancer and on prevention possibilities, and what they think the EU and individual countries can do about it, given that both ECPC and HEAL are European umbrella organisations working on EU policies. These testimonials will also contribute to future awareness raising and advocacy work that ECPC and HEAL will conduct. It provides a snapshot of views from the ECPC members as they begin to work on 'environmental cancer prevention'.

1. Why I am concerned about the links between chemicals in the environment and cancer? E.g. air pollution, pesticides, chemicals in water, food & consumer products

The Romanian Cancer Society is highly concerned with the environmental issues that can trigger cancer. Our concern is entirely entitled since in Romania there are various regions heavily polluted such as with heavy metals in the areas where the metallurgic industry is developed, with chlorine, hydrochloric acid and other chemical compounds in the chemical industry, with chemicals in water in all heavy industrialized areas, etc. We have also encountered along the years a very high number of cancer patients that come from these areas of our country. In the same time, a country concerned with economic struggle such as Romania is target to investors that give little interest to population health and avoiding pollution, e.g. the Rosia Montana still unsolved concerns on the investors wishing to exploit gold.

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In some forms of cancer, the link between the environment and cancer is absolutely proven. In other types of cancer, it is suggested. But, there is sufficient medical and scientific documentation that show the carcinogenicity of many chemical products. Enough studies show that breast cancer is linked with environmental factors. My own disease Multiple Myeloma is much more frequent in people who have been exposed to pesticides (eg. people who lived next in rural areas with major agriculture activity) and in people who have been exposed to radiation (nuclear workers, radiologists). Also the radiation pollution of Chernobyl has increased the number of Myeloma patients (as well as thyroid cancer patients). Myeloma is more frequent in flight crews and frequent air travellers, probably because of exposure to cosmic radiation at high altitude. I really feel concerned and frustrated because it is very difficult to avoid these exposures. We live in the most polluted area of Europe but it is impossible to protect yourself and the most vulnerable citizens, being children and pregnant women.

European Myeloma Platform, Belgium emp-office@uzbrussel.be

The NFK is primarily involved with quality of life and empowerment of people involved with cancer (patients, survivors, partners, etc.). The NFK acknowledges the importance of early prevention of cancer. However we are more inclined to focus on lifestyle, something people can influence by themselves, than to focus on environmental issues. None the less the NFK supports that by improving quality of air, food, etc., cancer can be prevented to a certain extend.

Nederlandse Federatie van Kankerpatiëntenorganisaties (NFK), The Netherlands l.maes@nfk.nl

Researchers have established that human bodies are exposed to the environment and therefore interact with it. The better the condition of the environment is the lesser becomes the dangerous impact on the human body. Therefore, by improving the present environmental conditions in high risk environmental places (and Romania is a good example when it comes to air pollution, food and consumer products) or by taking precautionary measures by reducing the use, for example, of the pesticides and chemicals, the number of cancers caused by environmental impact will be decreased. Last but not least important, the Health Commissioner decision to put a ban on use of tobacco represents an important step forward, considering that use of tobacco, just like other environmental exposures such as sunshine, radiation, hormones, viruses, bacteria, and chemicals in the air, water, food, excessive alcohol consumption represent cancer risk factors.

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People with health problems such as asthma, heart and lung disease may also suffer more when the air is polluted. The extent to which an individual is harmed by air pollution usually depends on the total exposure to the damaging chemicals, and include chronic respiratory disease, lung cancer, heart disease, and even damage to the brain, nerves, liver, or kidneys.

Associação Portuguesa de Leucemias e Linfomas, Portugal geral@apll.org

An ever-growing number of news reports and articles, highlight a definite link between cancer and our environment. The adverse effects of the chemicals that are used by farmers to increase crop yields and those used by food producers as fillers and preservatives are now showing up in the declining health of our population.

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On the issues of the relationship between cancer and the environment, we think we must work with the greatest rigor to avoid erroneous conclusions and not cause unnecessary social alarms.

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2. Why I think it is important to put greater focus on cancer prevention policies that target environmental exposures?

We strongly believe that in countries such as Romania every prevention policy should seriously regard the pollution issues especially when it comes to the exposed population living and working in those environments.

The Romanian Cancer Society, Romania src@iocn.ro

Cancer prevention is only effective if you focus on the source, the trigger of the disease. Screening is of course very important, but a step earlier is to tackle the sources of the diseases, which is probably for a big part the environmental exposure.

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All actions that lead to minimizing the risk of getting cancer are legitimized in a certain way. However it is important to prioritize. With which strategy can we prevent the risk of getting cancer the best. Is that through improving individual lifestyle, through improving environment or maybe a combination of both (or more topics). The lobby on prevention through improving environment would gain strength if research would clearly establish the link between environmental pollution and the risk of getting cancer. Lots of research has already been done but it is sometimes ambiguous.

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The environmental factors with deadly impact on human beings can be modified, because most of them involve lifestyle choices. As such, the researchers have established that 1/3 of all cancer deaths could be prevented by eliminating the use of tobacco, pesticides, unhealthy food, air and water pollution. Having considered that incidence of cancer death caused by tobacco is 29-31%? In decision of Health EU Commission is more that welcome and consistent with a new set of policies to be implemented by EU for addressing environmental issues. Similar initiatives should be taken in the field of unhealthy food products which cause 20% of cancer death. EU holistic and consistent prevention approach of all environmental causes which impact negatively on the healthy development of human body will diminish the incidence of death caused by exposure to environmental hazards.

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If people know there are on the risk of cancer they put greater focus on prevention. They need to know how to do that.

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Cancer prevention organizations have had some success in lobbying governments to ban the use of some pesticides and chemicals that have been proven harmful.. Unfortunately this corrective process is often mired in red tape, thus taking a long time to implement. A greater focus on cancer prevention policies would educate the general public and hopefully our politicians and lawmakers to treat this issue seriously and take action.

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It's good to work in that Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), because good practice on issues such as food or the environment, are always healthy practices and beneficial to health.

As women with breast cancer we always defend and support the healthy living practices. It's not good to generalize the statements which connect contaminants and cancer if those claims are not accompanied by sound scientific support. An isolated opinion is no contrasted scientific support.

The air pollution and pesticides are not good, but of these general statements can be deduced evidence for cancer in general? Is it possible to deduce evidence for a specific cancer?

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3. What I think the EU and Member States could do about this? Why should the EU and Member States focus on this?

We think that the EU should recommend to all member states and support them with a legal framework to develop national health policies that tackle these pollution problems.

The Romanian Cancer Society, Romania src@iocn.ro

The responsibilities of the MS and the EU are:

- to install very strict control systems. Of course, it is completely unrealistic to eliminate (nuclear) industry, (air) traffic, dangerous wastes etc. But these are environments that need strict controls in order to minimize possible exposure.

Some efforts have already been done. In Europe, there is a restriction on certain types of pesticides (compared with the years '70, when very toxic products were allowed) but controls are not sufficient. Many farmers still work with "forbidden" products (still available in some countries and via the internet). This is a testimony of my neighbour who is farmer!

- Further regulation is necessary as well as further research in order to gain more knowledge about the link between environmental exposures and cancer and the carcinogenetic characteristics of products.
- Very important is the control of food chains. In Belgium, we are still "traumatized" by the dioxin crisis of 1999! A real poison, dioxin, found its way into the food chain and the whole nation was exposed. The consequences of this disaster are still not clear. Belgium (for once) learnt a lot from this bad experience and has installed a severe food control system. But, I am not sure if these measures apply to other EU-countries.

- Information of citizens is very important. Not only to educate the population about the possible risks, but also to "sensitize" them. Pollution is a problem that is caused by everybody, not only the big industries, but also every little personal "environmental footprint" counts.

In emergency situations (eg. major pollution) MS should be transparent about the situation and inform citizens correctly and timely (this has eg. not been the case during the Chernobyl disaster).

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It is important to tackle environmental issues on a higher level of governance. If one country takes an effort it has less effect if it's neighbouring countries (or the countries it imports from) don't take the same effort.

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I have always stated that environments as well as health are matters of European safety and security. Shortcomings in any of these two fields may have disastrous impacts on socio-economic and cultural developments within Europe. Therefore, the faster we act in the fields of both Environmental and Health the better we can address these two issues of strategic importance for Europe. When it comes to EU, the role is quite simple. Stop the issuance of recommendation and replace them by legally binding laws for all member states. The national economic, social and cultural strategies will be able to develop only WITHIN A WELL ESTABLISHED FRAMEWORK given by EU laws for all member states. EU is presently at the stage where it cannot afford any longer that the Environment and Health national laws work well in Great Britain, Germany and the Northern EU states and meanwhile the rest of the EU countries disregard it. *Myeloma Euronet Romania, Romania viorica@myeloma.ro*

They could publish more information and they could invest more money to study all sides of the question.

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There is strength in numbers and a common voice among the EU member states would help to convince legislators to give health positive environmental legislation top priority.

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The European Union and Member States should continue to support more solvents researches; promote good environmental practices, provide the best and most reliable information. The European Union and Member States should continue to review and update policies, including health risks from exposure to certain pollutants. Our associations should continue to act responsibly, avoid social alarms, promoting training and health education and gender health, and advocate for healthy living practices in areas such as food or the environment.

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