



PRESS RELEASE

EU says cancer prevention needs to address environmental factors

Brussels 24 June 2009 – The European Commission's Communication on Cancer released today takes an important step forward in recognising the environmental dimension of cancer prevention, according to the Health and Environment Alliance. (1)

Historically, prevention work has predominantly focused on changing lifestyle risk factors, such as smoking and alcohol consumption.

Many environmental factors, including carcinogenic chemicals, pesticides and particles in air pollution, contribute to cancer. These cancers could be prevented by changes in policy to reduce people's involuntary exposure to these chemical substances. For the first time, the Commission officially acknowledges that cancer prevention should address lifestyle, occupational and environmental causes on an equal footing.

"We welcome today's Communication with its recognition that exposure to chemicals are key determinants of cancer," says Lisette van Vliet, Chemicals Policy Advisor. "As individuals, we have very limited choice about the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the level of chemical contamination in our indoor and outdoor environments."

In April 2008, the European Parliament recognised that the multiple factors and stages involved in cancer causation required "a new cancer prevention paradigm that addresses [the different causes] ... in a manner that reflects the actual combination effects of different causes, rather than focusing on isolated causes". (2) The Parliament also noted "the increasing scientific evidence that certain cancers, such as cancer of the bladder, bone cancer, lung cancer, skin cancer, breast cancer and others are caused not only by the effects of chemical substances, radiation and airborne particles but also by other environmental factors" in its Resolution of September 2008. (3)

An Impact Assessment commissioned by the European Parliament on recent pesticides legislation estimates that one per cent of cancers diagnosed each year in Europe may be directly associated with exposure to pesticides. (4)

HEAL is particularly keen to see stronger controls of man-made chemicals, especially hormone disruptors, under the EU chemicals legislation, known as REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restriction of Chemicals) and changes in the way chemicals are assessed. The decisions about the risks that chemicals pose should recognise people's multiple, concurrent exposures. Other important arenas for action in reducing cancer rates include strong implementation of pesticides legislation, and improving air quality in line with the World Health Organization recommendations.

The many European scientists who consider changes are needed to reduce people's exposures to hormone disrupting chemicals are supported by US experts. In a recent letter about the Obama Cancer Plan, medical and scientific experts highlight numerous different types of cancer and their links to everyday chemicals, such as sun screens, cosmetics and personal care products, and herbicides. They argue that more attention must be given to environmental prevention. (5)

"The EU has achieved huge success in cancer prevention through its determined action on smoke-free public places Europe-wide," says Lisette van Vliet. "We hope to help the new European Partnership Against Cancer make similar progress on wider environmental prevention by making all our indoor and outdoor environments cleaner and safer. For real primary environmental prevention, we must go beyond passive smoke exposure and lifestyle factors to bring down the number of cancer cases."

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Notes to journalist

1. The Communication on Cancer is available at http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_information/dissemination/diseases/docs/com_2009_291.en.pdf
Citizen's summary at http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_information/dissemination/diseases/docs/citizen_en.pdf
2. European Parliament Resolution of 10 April 2008 on Combatting Cancer in the Enlarged European Union
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0121+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>
3. European Parliament resolution of 4 September 2008 on the mid-term review of the European Environment and Health Action Plan 2004-2010 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0410+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>
4. See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies/download.do?file=22471>
5. Letter available <http://world-wire.com/news/0906150001.html>

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aims to raise awareness of how environmental protection and sustainability improves health and to empower the health community to contribute their expertise to policy making. Since its inception, HEAL's membership has grown to include a diverse network of more than 60 citizens', patients', women's, health professionals' and environmental organizations across Europe which together have a strong track record in increasing public and expert engagement in both EU debates and the decision-making process. Website: www.env-health.org