



Commissioner Stella Kyriakides
Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety
European Commission
1049 Bruxelles/Brussel
Belgium

29 September 2020

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,

We are writing to you to ask for your support in addressing the burden of Structural Heart Disease (SHD) on the EU population. The importance of tackling SHD has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which showed an increased risk of complications and casualties to the elderly population, particularly those with pre-existing cardiovascular disease.

Structural Heart Diseases are cardiac malformations that require repair and / or replacement of heart valves and are linked to functional decline and population ageing. The difference between having SHD and being disease free can mean the difference between living a fully independent life and not being able to make it up a flight of stairs. **SHD therefore prevents patients from healthy ageing, social inclusion and making valuable contributions to society.**

The prevalence of SHD increases with age. In Europe, 6% of people aged between 65-74 have SHD, 16% of those aged between 75-84, while 30% of the population above 85 is estimated to have SHD. With Europe's ageing population it is predicted that by the year **2040**, 155 million people will be over the age of 65 in Europe¹. This means that **approximately 20 million people across Europe will have SHD.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need of keeping the elderly population healthy by treating Structural Heart Disease. In its report on the impact of demographic change, the European Commission indicated that the outbreak of the Coronavirus exposed the vulnerability of older people to pandemics². It has been observed that, although the entire population is at risk of contracting COVID-19, the risk to develop complications increases with age and the pre-existence of co-morbidities. The death rate is significantly higher among

¹ Eurostat (2017) People in the EU – population projections http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=People_in_the_EU_-_population_projections

² European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/demography_report_2020_n.pdf



people aged 75+. In addition, recent publications have shown that patients with cardiovascular disease are at particular risk of complications and death¹.

In order to make healthcare systems throughout the EU better prepared for public health threats such as COVID-19, the resilience of Europe's elderly population must be strengthened. Improving early diagnosis and treatment of Structural Heart Disease is a crucial step to this end. The European Commission has already indicated that it is supportive of sharing expertise and collaborative work to prevent non-communicable diseases, and that Joint actions are a possible instrument to achieve such a goal². In fact, according to the Paper on the Impact of Demographic Change, more resilient health systems need proper investment and financial support that matches their leading role³. To this end, the European Commission has proposed the EU4health programme, which aims to decrease the impact of non-communicable diseases on individuals and society in the Union and to achieve the long-term goal of reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases by one third by 2030⁴. This is why it is timely to set up an **EU Joint Action on Structural Heart Disease**. Only through European cooperation and exchanging best practices can we work effectively towards resilient health care systems.

As co-chairs of the MEP heart group, **we ask the European Commission and Member States to launch a Joint Action on Structural Heart Disease**. Such a Joint Action should increase awareness of SHD and improve early diagnosis and treatment, so that no European citizen dies because of a lack of access to a heart health check. Early, proactive and curative treatment of Structural Heart Disease will allow patients to return to normal life rapidly, and to contribute actively to society. A resilient elderly population is the key to sustainable health care systems.

Kind regards,

Brando Benifei MEP

Co-Chair of MEP Heart Group

Maria da Graça Carvalho MEP

Co-Chair of MEP Heart Group

¹ WHO Europe Surveillance report <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/weekly-surveillance-report>

² European Commission's answer to Parliamentary Question E-001677/2019: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2019-001677-ASW_EN.html

³ European Commission's Report on the Impact of Demographic Change: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/demography_report_2020_n.pdf

⁴ European Commission's proposal for the EU4Health programme: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9b76a771-a0c4-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF