

PRESS RELEASE: Cardiovascular health takes centre stage in Brussels

Brussels, 04 November 2013: The first ever Cardiovascular Health Week kicks off today in the European Parliament in Brussels. It will go on until 8 November 2013 with awareness-raising activities around the theme 'Mind Your Heart – for a Heart Healthy Europe'. The initiative is organised by the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) Heart Group, under the auspices of the European Parliament and with the support of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and of the European Heart Network (EHN).

During the week MEP Heart Group meetings will be held with European experts to discuss pressing issues related to cardiovascular health. Other activities include cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training, free cardio fitness classes in the European Parliament Sports Centre, and heart healthy meals in the main European Parliament restaurant.

In addition, a cardiovascular screening exercise will allow MEPs to have their blood pressure and cholesterol measurements taken, which will be used to predict their 10-year risk of mortality from heart attack and stroke. They will then receive advice on how to adopt a more heart healthy lifestyle. Staffan Josephson, President of the European Heart Network, said: "We hope this will show MEPs that there is a lot they can do to help protect EU citizens if cardiovascular disease (CVD)-friendly policies are in place, such as banning smoking in public places and making healthy food affordable."

In anticipation of the European Parliament elections in May 2014, MEPs will be encouraged to show their support with a 'Pledge for Cardiovascular Health', which commits them to consider the impact of cardiovascular health when voting on European Union (EU) legislation and support national strategies to promote cardiovascular health. MEPs can include the pledge in their election manifesto. Photo opportunities with the pledge will be available for MEPs to make a visual endorsement.

Commenting on the importance of this far-reaching endeavour, Ms Linda McAvan MEP and Dr Antonia Parvanova MEP, Co-Chairs of the MEP Heart Group, said: "Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer in Europe, causing 1.9 million deaths every year, yet there is no dedicated policy on CVD at EU level. The MEP Heart Group is pleased to encourage the engagement of EU policymakers to make the EU a force for protecting and promoting cardiovascular health."

Cardiovascular Health Week kicks off tonight, with an Opening Ceremony which will be attended by high-level keynote speakers including the European Commissioner for Health Tonio Borg, Lithuanian Minister of Health Dr Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, and Dr Roberto Bertollini, Chief Scientist and World Health Organization (WHO) Representative to the EU.

Warmly welcoming the initiative, Mr Borg said: "As the primary cause of death and disability in Europe, cardiovascular diseases deserve great attention at EU level. This awareness week is a big step towards putting CVD higher on the EU agenda and generating an environment that is conducive to cardiovascular health, for the good of European citizens."

Dr Andriukaitis said: "Cardiovascular Health Week represents a unique opportunity for policymakers to show EU citizens in their Member States that they care about their health. The Lithuanian Presidency is part of this endeavour - for instance, I am personally spearheading a first-reading adoption of the Tobacco Products Directive, as we know that smoking causes 28% of CVD deaths in adult men and 13% in women of the same age."

Expressing WHO's support for the initiative, Dr Bertollini said: "MEPs can promote heart healthy lifestyles in their own countries by calling for and supporting WHO and EU policies that discourage smoking and encourage a healthy diet and physical activity. By 2030 more than 23 million people will die annually from CVDs including heart disease and stroke. This is despite the fact that CVD is largely preventable through control of risk factors such as high blood pressure."

Professor Panagiotis Vardas, President of the European Society of Cardiology, concluded: "This is the first time the European Parliament has dedicated a week to cardiovascular disease. As a medical doctor, I see this high-level engagement of EU policymakers as a major contribution in striving for optimal prevention and treatment. These will fall short if they are not supported by a strong political commitment."

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Embargoed for release:
Monday, 4 November 2013 00:01 GMT (London)

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Notes to editor

About the MEP Heart Group

The main objective of the MEP Heart Group is to promote measures that will help reduce the burden of CVD in the European Union and to raise awareness of the disease among target audiences through a series of dedicated activities. The MEP Heart Group is led by two Co-Chairs, Ms Linda McAvan MEP (S&D, UK) and Dr Antonia Parvanova MEP (ALDE, BG). The European Heart Network and the European Society of Cardiology provide support to the MEP Heart Group by running its secretariat.

About the European Society of Cardiology

The European Society of Cardiology (ESC) represents more than 80 000 cardiology professionals across Europe and the Mediterranean. Its mission is to reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease in Europe.

About the European Heart Network

The European Heart Network (EHN) is a Brussels-based alliance of heart foundations and like-minded non-governmental organisations throughout Europe. EHN has member organisations in 24 countries. EHN plays a leading role in the prevention and reduction of cardiovascular diseases, in particular heart disease and stroke, through advocacy, networking, capacity building and patient support, so that they are no longer a major cause of premature death and disability throughout Europe.