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18 June 2020

Subject: BEUC welcomes the European Commission’s proposed EU4Health Programme

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,

On behalf of BEUC, I would like to congratulate the European Commission on its 2021-2027 Health Programme ‘EU4Health’ proposal. An ambitious, standalone health programme is essential to take EU health policy and its achievements to the next level, address the COVID-19 pandemic and be better prepared to face future cross-border threats.

European citizens are living, on average, longer and healthier lives. However, important health disparities persist both between and within Member States. Consumers face common challenges, such as un-met medical needs, a digital divide, sky-rocketing medicine prices and a shortage of essential medicines.

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic is shedding light on pre-existing gaps in our health systems. It has also shown a lack of preparedness to respond more effectively to cross-border health threats. For example, more attention should have been paid to research on coronaviruses and on tools to speed up the availability of vaccines against epidemic-prone infectious diseases. Likewise, a well-established structure at the EU level for effective coordination on medicine shortages should have already been in place.

Nevertheless, we welcome the EU’s commitment to address the crisis. In particular, we support recent investments in the development of vaccines and treatments and coordination efforts to ensure the availability of medical goods. But ongoing efforts are not enough. Stronger EU action, with close involvement of the Member States, is needed well beyond the current crisis to deliver a more lasting impact to people’s health and our healthcare systems.

The Commission’s view that health must be given higher priority in the future financial framework should therefore be supported. It is for this reason that we strongly endorse the Commission’s proposal for a better resourced and more ambitious Health Programme, and the general objectives. We particularly welcome the support to:

- Cooperation on health technology assessments;
- Action to monitor shortages of medicines and medical devices and efforts to increase their supply security. The EU4Health Programme should enable rapid communication and coordination among Member States on drug shortages through a permanent and properly-resourced system;
- The digital transformation in the healthcare sector. In this regard, it will be important to ensure that the uptake of digital products and services goes hand in hand with core values of medical ethics, complies with data protection rules and is supported by enforceable rights for patients and consumers.

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We also call for an expanded Euripid project to enable information-sharing between Member States on medicines net prices. Conditionalities in research funding are also required to ensure the availability and affordability of health technologies. We would also like to see health promotion and disease prevention specifically mentioned as part of the programme's general objectives.

As we already stated in 2018,¹ an ambitious future Health Programme is an important vehicle through which the EU can meet citizens' expectations and needs on health and demonstrate more clearly that it provides the overall population with tangible benefits.

We look forward to an opportunity to discuss with you in more detail about how to strengthen EU health policy and for an ambitious, public needs-driven Health Programme to be put in place in 2021.

We have also sent a copy of this letter to Vice-President Schinas.

Yours sincerely,

Monique Goyens
Director-General

¹ BEUC. Future EU Health Programme urgently needs financial support, 23 April 2018.
http://www.beuc.eu/publications/beuc-x-2018-033_future_eu_health_programme_urgently_needs_financial_support.pdf