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February 5, 2021

**RE: European Head and Neck Society's *Make Sense* campaign supports Europe's Beating Cancer Plan**

Dear Ms Gallina, Mr Ryan,

We are writing to you today to share our support for Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and the European Commission's focus on cancer as one of the key public health challenges of our time. It is our view that 3 February 2021 will be remembered as a momentous day representing hope for Europe's cancer community.

Following a review of the Plan, we are delighted and encouraged by the action-orientated, time-focused plan, which we believe offers a comprehensive roadmap to dealing with the issues that cancer poses across Europe.

As head and neck cancer specialists, we continue to be concerned about the particular risk that head and neck cancer poses for Europe. While many subtypes are classified as rare diseases, when grouped together, head and neck cancers amounted to the eighth most common cause of death due to cancer in Europe in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

This paradox has contributed to head and neck cancer posing a significant but widely unknown public health issue, with large discrepancies in the prognosis and quality of care for patients with head and neck cancer existing across Europe. It is also anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic will only further compound these concerns and exacerbate the existing issue of late diagnosis. For those living with the disease, head and neck cancer can have a profound impact on quality of life, altering a patient's appearance, personal functions such as eating, drinking or speaking, as well as being a significant toll on mental health.

In September 2020, we launched our expert-authored White Paper, which was supported by Cristian Buşoi, MEP and Chair of the European Parliament Challenge Cancer Intergroup, outlining the actions needed to highlight and address the complex issues faced by those living with head and neck cancers in Europe. We are pleased that upon reviewing Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, many of our recommended action points are represented and strongly aligned with the planned actions by the European Commission.

**MAKESENSECAMPAIGN**



Of note, we particularly welcome the development of the Plan's actions in the following areas:

- Tobacco and alcohol consumption continue to be a significant driver of head and neck cancer cases, and we welcome the meaningful tactics in the Plan that will be implemented across Europe to raise awareness of the health risks and reduce alcohol and tobacco use.
- Multidisciplinary care offered in specialised centres is a crucial component for the successful treatment and management of head and neck cancers, and we are gratified to see that the Plan includes several programmes that will undoubtedly further promote a multidisciplinary approach.
- We welcome the creation of additional European Reference Networks (ERNs), specifically those that focus on areas related to head and neck cancers, including metastatic diseases, complex cancers with poor prognosis, palliative care and survivorship. Indeed, existing ERNs have been an important asset to head and neck cancer care; we look forward to seeing how these can further assist in sharing learnings, improving quality of care, generating real-world evidence and understanding the long-term health impact of intensive treatments used for advanced head and neck cancers.
- We thank the Commission for acknowledging the substantial and unacceptable differences in standards of care across Europe; sadly, these inequalities in care persist across a large number of tumour types, including head and neck cancer. We therefore welcome the establishment of the Cancer Inequalities Registry to map out and create an action plan to guide investment and interventions at an EU, national and regional level, as well as the establishment of the EU Network linking National Comprehensive Cancer Centres in every Member State by 2025. These actions are crucial steps needed towards achieving consistency of care across Europe.
- Finally, improving access to medicines for cancers with poor prognosis and rare cancers, such as head and neck cancer, will be vital in improving patient outcomes. Furthermore, exploring personalised medicine and improving funding for research – with the Plan specifically mentioning head and neck cancers – are very much welcomed.

In addition to these points, we also wanted to highlight specific areas of the Plan where we urge the Commission to consider adopting additional measures. We are therefore calling on you both today to advocate for the incorporation of the following action points into the Europe's Cancer Beating Plan:

- Early detection of head and neck cancer remains a major challenge in Europe, with approximately 60% of people presenting with locally advanced disease at diagnosis, where outcomes are poor.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore encouraging to see the focus on early detection, specifically through screening. That said, head and neck cancer is not listed as a tumour type that is being considered for a Europe-wide screening programme in the Plan and this needs to change. We urge the European Commission to consider head and neck cancers in these discussions.
- Beyond the benefits of screening, awareness campaigns are an effective tool for early detection. It is our view that the European Commission should actively encourage and support these public-facing campaigns, as they are invaluable for communicating signs and symptoms and encouraging those in need to seek medical advice early. One such example is our *Make Sense* campaign and its annual Head and Neck cancer awareness week, which runs during the third week of September throughout Europe. For further

details on the signs and symptoms of head and neck cancer or the Campaign, please visit <https://makesensecampaign.eu/en/>

- The incidence of HPV-related head and neck cancer continues to grow year-on-year, particularly affecting younger adults regardless of gender, and HPV is a known risk factor for head and neck cancer. While we welcome the commitment in the Plan to increase routine HPV vaccination for both boys and girls, we urge the adoption of firmer targets for achieving vaccination of boys at a Member State level, as this will be crucial to lowering the incidence of HPV-related head and neck cancer. In addition, the Plan only refers to this vaccination programme as a means to eliminate 'cervical cancer and other cancers', which in our view does not adequately communicate the link between HPV and head and neck cancer.
- Lastly, we welcome the inclusion of survivorship as an important topic throughout the Plan and the proposed 'Better Life for Cancer Patients Initiative', and the creation of a virtual 'European Cancer Patient Digital Centre' to support the exchange of patients' data and monitoring of survivors' health conditions. Beyond these initiatives, however, we call on the Commission to consider supporting the development of expert-authored, pan-European survivorship guidelines for a variety of tumour types in an effort to promote uniform and quality care. Head and neck cancer survivors often require significant and ongoing treatment and support, but at present disparities in care exist.

With the above in mind, we would like to invite you to meet with us to discuss the above action points, answer any questions you may have and share further information on how we can work together on our shared goal of improving the outlook for head and neck cancers.

Once again, we would like to congratulate all those involved in the development of the Plan, thank the Commission for giving cancer the prominence on the political agenda it deserves, and we very much look forward to seeing the Plan in action.

Yours sincerely,



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**Professor Wojciech Golusiński**

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**Professor Lisa Licitra**

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**About the *Make Sense* Campaign**

The *Make Sense* campaign, initiated by the European Head and Neck Society (EHNS), aims to raise awareness of head and neck cancer and ultimately improve outcomes for patients with the disease. It will do this through:

- Education on disease prevention
- Driving understanding of the signs and symptoms of the disease
- Encouraging earlier presentation, diagnosis and referral

The *Make Sense* campaign is supported by Bristol-Myers Squibb, Debiopharm, Merck and MSD. More information about the campaign is available at <https://makesensecampaign.eu/>, on [Twitter](#) and on [Facebook](#).

**About the EHNS**

The European Head and Neck Society (EHNS) is an international non-profit association based in Belgium. The EHNS is composed of individuals, national and multinational societies, and associated study groups oriented towards head and neck cancer research, training and treatment throughout Europe. Individuals from the rest of the world are also welcome to apply for membership. The intent of the EHNS is to promote exchange of knowledge in all aspects of head and neck neoplastic diseases and to promote the highest standards of research, education and training, disease prevention and patient care. For more information on the society, please visit: <http://www.ehns.org>.

**References:**

1. Ferlay J et al. Global Cancer Observatory: Cancer Today. Lyon, France: International Agency for Research on Cancer. 2020. Available at: [https://gco.iarc.fr/today/online-analysis-table?v=2020&mode=cancer&mode\\_population=continents&population=900&populations=908&key=asr&sex=0&can cer=39&type=1&statistic=5&prevalence=0&population\\_group=0&ages\\_group%5B%5D=0&ages\\_group%5B%5D=17 &group\\_cancer=1&include\\_nmssc=1&include\\_nmssc\\_other=1](https://gco.iarc.fr/today/online-analysis-table?v=2020&mode=cancer&mode_population=continents&population=900&populations=908&key=asr&sex=0&can cer=39&type=1&statistic=5&prevalence=0&population_group=0&ages_group%5B%5D=0&ages_group%5B%5D=17 &group_cancer=1&include_nmssc=1&include_nmssc_other=1). Accessed February 2021.
2. Heroiu Cataloiu AD et al. *Maedica (Bucur)*. 2013;8(1):80–85.