

Promoting civic information to better address the collateral damage of COVID-19 on cardiovascular disease across Europe

29 September 2021

11.30 to 13.00 CEST

Opening Remarks

The moderator **Jacqueline Bowman-Busato** presented the event, the panelists, and the topics to address.

Mariano Votta, Responsible for EU Affairs – Cittadinanzattiva / Director Active Citizenship Network, proceeded to introduce the event by highlighting the need to, in occasion of the Annual “World Heart Day”, focus on heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the world, and put in the background, for a moment, the current vaccination campaign against Covid-19.

To read the opening remarks, [click here](#).

MEP Kateřina Konečná, member of the MEPs Interest Group "European Patients' Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare", emphasized how much lockdowns, physical distancing, and traveling limitations due to Covid-19 put a strain on the people suffering from non-communicable diseases, making them more exposed to risk factors and hindering their access to healthcare. Cardiovascular prevention, in particular, weakened during the pandemic. MEP Konečná claimed that **neglected prevention is a hidden scarecrow that has been living under the surface for many years**.

In this regard, we need to work harder to deepen cooperation between EU member states as dealing with the consequences will cost more if prevention is neglected.

On the positive side, MEP Konečná still highlighted that, of course, prevention of CVDs has continued despite the pandemic in several member states. Today doctors have new means and technologies able to monitor patients' hearts remotely. However, their use is still very much limited, and telemedicine and e-health are still in their initial phase. Furthermore, even though the funding for health has increased throughout the EU, it is still not enough to address all the healthcare challenges that Covid has created.

Donata Meroni, of the European Commission went on to make valuable statements about the still poor and little knowledge regarding the magnitude of Covid-19 long-term consequences. Of course, people with heart conditions develop a higher risk of severe complications from Covid-19.

A key element is the [Steering Group on Health Promotion, Disease Prevention and Management of Non-Communicable Diseases](#), which represents EU countries and EU bodies, supports the implementation of best practices and monitors the development of policies at the EU level. The EU commission supports the implementation of best practices especially in the area of diabetes type 2 and promotion of healthy lifestyles in prevention of CVDs. The key is working together to find a workable solution: **let's work towards health outcomes!**

Fear of COVID-19

The fear of Covid-19 was addressed by **Prof. Christiaan Vrints**, who emphasized how the fear of the pandemic perceived by patients prevented optimal CV care. Patients with coronary risk factors, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, etc. are at a higher risk of Covid infection-related cardiovascular complications and the lack of sufficient personal gear at the start of the pandemic, the

fear of contagion and the clogging of hospitals all blocked CVDs patients from going to healthcare centers for their regular medical visits. Prof. Christiaan Vrints noted that:

- There was a decrease in the admission of patients suffering from acute coronary syndromes and myocardial infarction and an increase in mortality of these patients
- There was a universal decline of acute myocardial infarctions in hospitals during the first wave of the pandemic: countries with total lockdowns and hospitals with many Covid admissions were the most affected.
- Coronary care units were used to treat Covid patients rather than STEMI patients
- Fear of hospitals and missed medical visits increased
- Worsening of outcome of patients with heart attack: increase in the incidents of out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Heart disease remains the leading cause of death.

To see the slides, [click here](#).

Sharing experiences across Europe

Daniela Quaggia, part of ACN staff, has explained the EU project “[Increasing consciousness and access to treatment, reducing the burden of cardiovascular diseases across Europe](#)” and has shown the video awareness campaign realized in the framework of CVDs prevention. [Click here](#) to watch the videos, subtitled in 10 different languages.

Penilla Gunther, from FOKUS Patient, has put forward three good examples of concrete initiatives on CVDs awareness raising and prevention:

- A campaign realized during the pandemic from [GlobalHeartHub](#) about taking care of your symptoms and seeking help when you need.
- A Covid 2020 pandemic survey made by [Patient-View](#) looking at patient-group perceptions of how the pandemic has affected pharmaceutical companies, patient organizations, patients.
- Being a member of the Heart Failure Policy Network is an example of contributing to actions and activities and an easy way of keeping in touch with your network for getting news and acquiring knowledge on the matter. On September 7, the “Action Statement on Heart Failure” was launched and endorsed by 27 organizations in Europe, which is a call to action for the EU to address the growing burden of heart failure.

Only through the joint effort, change can be achieved and healthcare systems can be improved.

To see the slides, [click here](#).

Penka Georgieva, from Association of Patients with Cardiovascular Diseases, has also shared the main initiatives her association has carried out during Covid-19:

- An online consultation with a psychologist for CVDs patients: survey to patients on the main health concerns and on the need of psychologists in such a crucial time.
- The publishing of informative articles on the “Health and Culture platform” with advice for patients with CVDs and Covid on how to prevent complications.
- Three plenary sessions for journalists attended by 20 people circa on how to decrease panic in societies and on the consequences of the media on the fear of Covid.

To see the slides, [click here](#).

Roundtable & Q&A “Prevention? Yes! But not only for Covid-19”

At the roundtable, **Marissa Mes** (Programme Lead at The Heart Failure Policy Network), **Arlene Wilkie** (Director General at SAFE), and **Paolo Sbraccia** (Treasurer of EASO) participated.

Marissa Mes discussed about how CVDs care was already struggling before the pandemic and is now just becoming worse: currently, access to community-based heart failure nursing teams, access to GPs, and access to medications, all declined.

Also, Marissa stated that **it is not all about prevention**: some CVDs are inherited and cannot always be prevented, so there is also the necessity for a secondary prevention linked to the treatment of these diseases and to the building of services that can keep these diseases from progressing further.

Arlene Wilkie addressed what the pandemic has shown us, that is that **we must do something to make our systems more resilient and stronger for our citizens**. The problems highlighted by the pandemic were not new and must be resolved urgently by bringing together the key players in the field and develop a comprehensive policy at the EU level.

Last, but not least, **Paolo Sbraccia**, in relation to the issue of obesity as a key driver for CVDs, emphasized the consequences Covid-19 had on people suffering from obesity – primarily lack of access to the right cures and lockdowns and containment measures aggravating their conditions. Also, **improving treatment modalities is just as important as prevention**.

All speakers agreed on the need to involve EU policymakers, NGOs, citizens themselves, and other relevant actors in order to develop a comprehensive plan at the EU level.

Closing remarks

Paul Field, Head of Patient Relations and Strategic Communications – Thrombosis, Bayer, underlined both the need to approach CVDs as singular units since they encompass numerous health conditions and the need to join efforts and work together towards an improved CVDs prevention.

Mariano Votta concluded the event by briefly stating what the possible future next steps aimed at improving the overall healthcare system and the access to it throughout Europe will be.

To read the final remarks, [click here](#).

Curated by Maira Cardillo and Anastasiia Savchuk, Active Citizenship Network staff.