
EUROPE AGAINST CANCER

About one million people in the European Community are afflicted with cancer each year, cancer ranking as the number two killer after heart disease. Over the past 40 years the overall incidence of cancer has in fact increased, with cancer of the lungs, bladder and kidneys being the most prevalent. Cancer of the stomach and oesophagus now appears less frequently.

The heads of state and government, meeting as the European Council in Milan and then Luxembourg in 1985, strongly supported Community action in grappling with the scourge. In July 1986, the Council of Ministers adopted a Resolution on a Community programme of action against cancer, later known as Europe Against Cancer.

Aided by a report from an ad hoc committee of cancer specialists, the programme covers prevention, research and education. In May 1987, the Council of Health Ministers confirmed in principle the Commission's proposals, and approved a three-year information and public awareness campaign, in 1987-89, against the disease. There will be a Europe Against Cancer Week in May 1988. The following year, 1989, is designated as European Cancer Information Year.

Fighting Cancer

The Commission points out that we no longer have to accept that cancer is a fatal disease. Frequency of cancer should be reduced by prevention and treatment improved through therapeutic research. Even so, if there is no change by the year 2000, one European in three will be affected by cancer at some time in his or her life, compared with one in four today.

Encouraged by the European Councils, the Commission convened a cancer expert committee, with representatives from each Community country. The committee's report, published in March 1986, emphasised that a campaign of prevention of cancer should include actions on tobacco; occupational cancer; early detection, such as screens for cancer of the cervix or the breast; nutrition covering diets, including alcohol; and registration to assist planning and evaluation of cancer control measures. There should also be collaboration with international bodies such as the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

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Analyses show that of cancer deaths:

- one-third are attributed to diet, particularly alcohol;
- one third to cigarette smoking;
- one-third to factors including infection, sexual and reproduction behaviour and occupational activities.

About 40 per cent of all cancers are beyond possible control. The aim of the Community programme is to reduce this level to at most 10 per cent. Among other comments the committee recommended the following guidelines:

- reduced or no smoking (with a maximum of 3 cigarettes a day);
- reduced alcohol consumption (maximum equivalent of half a litre of wine a day);
- improved gynaecological hygiene;
- moderate sun tanning;
- improved nutrition (less animal fat, more cereals, vitamins and vegetables).

The Europe Against Cancer Programme

The aim is to reduce cancer mortality by 15 per cent, in line with the WHO's 'Health 2000' programme. The Programme is planned to cover 1987-1989. It proposed 75 actions in the areas of cancer prevention; informing the general public, training of health-care workers and cancer research. The main points are summarised briefly.

- Fighting the tobacco habit: The Commission is proposing 14 actions concerning increased taxation on tobacco, the prohibition of duty-free sales on tobacco in the European Community, the reduction of tobacco production, and information and public awareness in the fight against tobacco.
- Nutrition: Some nine activities promote changing eating habits and improving diets. Alcohol, though less related than smoking to cancer, is believed an irritant leading to cancer of the mouth and oesophagus from over-drinking. There should also be better information and protection for the consumer.
- Protection against carcinogenic agents: The seven proposals in this area deal with the protection both of workers and the general public against ionizing radiation and chemicals that link with cancer.
- Screening and early detection: Early screening of the cervix and/or the breasts can result in removal of a tumour before it develops. The European Commission aims to promote more effective use of screening, a valuable asset to women.

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