



XIV EUROPEAN PATIENTS' RIGHTS DAY

ONE health approach, MULTIPLE answers: Citizens' engagement & stakeholders' actions to tackle antimicrobial resistance and sustain EU progress

DIGITAL CONFERENCE
18th & 19th November 2020

Opening Remarks and Keynote Presentations 18th November 2020

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Good afternoon and greetings from Rome, where the headquarters of Active Citizenship Network is located. Welcome to the European celebration of the fourteen Edition of the European Patients' Rights Day, the first realized in digital format.

As you probably know, Active Citizenship Network, the European branch of the Italian NGO Cittadinanzattiva, has promoted this multi-stakeholder event since 2007, and as its Director, I am very honored to celebrate its anniversary, especially in this difficult situation that we are all facing. The pandemic might have forced us to postpone the event, which was originally planned at the EU Parliament during the first half of 2020, but not to cancel it.

In the historical moment, the European Patients' Rights Day acquires a particular meaning, as the pandemic has shown us:

- The widespread responsibility of national health systems that have become weaker over time, I can say it with certainty as regards my country, Italy, and that on the contrary should be reinforced as a common good to be safeguarded.
- The unacceptable lack of respect towards the elderly, especially our parents and grandparents.
- The suffering of thousands of families for the huge number of people affected and passed away during the past months, as well as the crucial role of our behavior and individual responsibility to help reduce contagions, and the need to increase citizens' engagement in the context of global health.
- The professional and social value of health workers, that we will eternally thank for their sacrifice today and we hope to adequately recognize tomorrow.
- The crucial cooperation among countries, within the European Union and all around the world, and among Institutions at all levels.
- The leading role of research and the scientific society, as we are all waiting for the vaccine & new anti Covid-19 therapies.
- The importance to improve the enforceability and respect of patients' rights in Europe and in each member state in order to reduce health inequalities and guarantee, even during the pandemic, patient safety and access to care also for non Covid-19 patients. Indeed, oncological and chronic patients across the world have been significantly neglected and because of this, at the end of the emergency, we will count not only the deaths caused by Covid-19, but also the number of people who died because they didn't receive care for themselves.

The decision to dedicate this Annual EU conference to AMR was taken before the pandemic, in line with our commitment to the topic and more in general the issue of patient safety (one of the 14 principles stated in the EU Charter of Patients' Rights). The pandemic has then reinforced this decision, considering that we are dealing

with two emergences that are interlinked, as the WHO Representative will explain later on.

As a matter of fact, antibiotics were largely used with patients affected by Sars-Cov-2/COVID-19. Just to report some data:

- A review of studies published on hospitalized COVID-19 patients has identified that while 72% (1450/2010) of patients received antibiotics, only 8% (62/806) of them demonstrated superimposed bacterial or fungal co-infections¹.
- In my country, the Italian National Institute of Health affirms that over 3.335 patients who died from Covid-19, 86% of them has undergone antibiotic treatment, despite only 12% of them had a superimposed bacterial infection.

The impact that this empirical use of antibiotics will have over a potential increase of AMR, certainly needs to be taken into consideration. It is obvious that “without effective action, AMR will take us back to a pre-antibiotic age when death by infection was much more common”.

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized AMR as one of the 10 most urgent threats that will demand attention from the WHO and health partners. In many parts of the world, in fact, AMR has reached alarming levels and already presents a serious social and economic burden. At a global level, it is estimated that 700 thousand persons die every year due to bacterial infections that antibiotics can no longer cure because of AMR. In Europe, prior to COVID-19, there were 33 thousand deaths. By 2050, AMR may cause more deaths than cancer.

My country, Italy, is at the bottom of the European ranking, reporting 10 thousand deaths directly linked to antibiotics' loss of efficacy. This number is even higher than the number of victims of road accidents.

¹ <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/98/7/20-268573/en/>

Beside the human suffering caused by these circumstances, AMR also increases the cost of treatment and weakens the productivity of the workforce due to illnesses. In the EU, it is estimated that AMR costs 1.5 billion euros annually in healthcare costs and productivity losses, negatively affecting the economy and representing a threat to economic growth, sustainable healthcare and the development of a productive and healthy population.

Several European and national healthcare stakeholders are working on this growing issue, and I thank in advance all the experts that have accepted to be involved in the panel of this two-day initiative. The European Commission, for instance, is tackling this issue also with the Joint Action on Antimicrobial Resistance and Healthcare-Associated Infections (EU-JAMRAI), whose aim is to improve coordination among national health ministries and other key stakeholders, through the One Health approach., that I would like to thank for its deep involvement in our initiative.

Against this background, there exists a huge discrepancy between the severity of the situation and the low level of awareness of European citizens.

Just after the EU Election, 17 organizations active in human and animal health (including Active Citizenship Network) have sent an open letter to the Members of the European Parliament, urging them to bring antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to the forefront of EU inter-institutional discussions and to support the establishment of a dedicated AMR parliamentary group in partnership with the civil society and dedicated stakeholders. The group was launched in 21 November 2019, and I am sure that tomorrow its Vice-Chair, MEP Tiemo Wölken (from Germany), our guest, will mention this initiative, which is supported by the AMR Stakeholder Network, of which my organization is part, and coordinated by the European Public Health Alliance that we have to thank for their efforts and that we had invited to join us.

Last month, several MEPs clearly underlined to the Health Commissioner that AMR is a key area in which European citizens expect firm European action. Reducing the abuse of antibiotics by prioritizing their correct use seems to be one of the few solutions to preserve their efficacy and limit the emergence of resistance. After all, antibiotics represent a value to be safeguarded and a priority for public health. Therefore, it is necessary to support research, reduce barriers, and accelerate approval of new antibiotics treating resilient infections. I imagine we will talk about this with our guests during the roundtable discussion today.

In addition, the fight against AMR also involves the use of innovative sanitation systems, as we will learn tomorrow thanks to the presentation of a best practice that aims at reducing AMR and simultaneously guarantee savings for the health-care system.

A third element we would like to emphasize, especially now that we are in the World Antimicrobial Awareness Week, concerns the potential for a better individual awareness in our everyday life.

- During this pandemic, how do we behave with regards to purchasing medicines? According to a survey presented a few days ago by my organization in Italy, 36,5% of pharmacists report citizens stocking up medicines, and 63% of the pharmacists interviewed claim that citizens have demanded antibiotics without any prescription.
- And also, how do we behave at the supermarket with regards to foods produced “without any use of antibiotics”? What lies behind this label and why it should not be overlooked? How can we value our informed choices as citizens and consumers?

These are only two examples that demonstrate the importance of a better individual awareness in order to improve our ordinary behavior in line with the so-called “next Public Health Crisis” (by 2050 super bacteria could cause 350 million of deaths).

We hope that the new “Antibiotic Resistance Symbol”, realized in the framework of the EU-JAMRAI - also thanks our commitment in the Jury- will be accepted and recognized as a useful tool. It will be presented tomorrow, and we will contribute to disseminate it.

Well, I have finished my introduction.

Please let me thank MEP Brando Benifei for confirming also this year his interest in this initiative, and Brian Maguire for having agreed to chair the conference. As a journalist, producer and broadcaster, with great experiences on European politics and business, Brian is the right person to be the moderator of this event.

Thank you all once again, I wish you a worthwhile and interesting conference.