

*When Stella Kyriakides took on the post of EU Health Commissioner in September 2019, Europe's cancer community knew they could trust her to fight their cause. Within months she was launching a public consultation on Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. Then came COVID. **Alberto Costa** asked her how her experience as a breast cancer survivor and patient advocate shaped her approach to her new role and how she is coping with the demands of responding to a major public health crisis while still delivering on the expectations of the cancer community.*

Cancer World: *You were still becoming familiar with your new office at the Berlaymont in Brussels when the COVID-19 pandemic exploded. How did you respond?*

Stella Kyriakides: In Greek, there is a saying: "In difficult situations, you just roll up your sleeves and get the work done." There was no option but to do everything to rise to the challenge of the greatest public health crisis in memory. Quickly getting a grasp of the issues at hand, ensuring we have the right expertise in place, connecting the dots to our Member States and European Parliament, and finding pragmatic, concrete and workable solutions as quickly as possible in a calm and effective way. The COVID-19 crisis has affected the lives of countless citizens and businesses around the globe. As European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, it is my responsibility to ensure that we do everything we can to protect public health. It is important to be prepared for any eventuality at all times, and be ready to react swiftly. We have faced countless challenges since the beginning of the pandemic. However, these challenges and difficulties cannot in any way be compared to those faced on a daily basis by frontline workers. Despite unprecedented pressure, and in the most difficult of circumstances, they continue to provide lifesaving treatment and care to thousands of citizens, and to put themselves at risk every day to protect us all. They are the true heroes of the COVID era. Clapping for the carers night after night was one of the many inspiring acts of solidarity we witnessed across Europe during this crisis.

CW: *You've been a Member of Parliament for many years in your home country, Cyprus, where problems have relatively limited dimensions. How does it feel to now have such a huge responsibility at a European level?*

SK: It is of course a great responsibility, but I have always approached every personal challenge in a similar way: setting high targets, working hard and giving my best to deliver on expectations. This means, among other things, to be able to work in effective teams, in a coordinated and focused way, taking all viewpoints on board, having flexibility when needed to find solutions - much more so when we find ourselves in unprecedented crisis situations.

This tragedy we are experiencing in Europe and the world has had an immeasurable cost, primarily on human lives, but also on our economies, on society at large and, unfortunately, much more on those most vulnerable amongst us.

CW: *Europe's cancer community is expecting great things from your Beating Cancer Plan. What are you trying to achieve with it and how?*

SK: Every year, 3.5 million people in the EU are diagnosed with cancer, and 1.3 million die from it. Many of us have personal experiences and know the pain it causes for those we love. This is why the high expectations that you mention are justified and why Europe's Beating Cancer Plan is a major priority for myself and for the whole von der Leyen Commission. Our aim is to reduce the cancer burden for patients, their families and health systems, focusing on: prevention through healthier lifestyles; improved screening and early detection; and equal access to medicines and innovative treatments. With this focus, we are aiming to achieve a better quality of life for cancer patients, for those living with advanced disease, for survivors and carers. In recent months, we have also seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected cancer prevention and care, underlining the importance of robust and resilient health systems that function in all circumstances. Europe has been actively

working to fight cancer for decades. We are committed to presenting the [Europe Beating Cancer Plan](#) by the end of this year. This could not be more personal for me – as it is also for so many of us.

CW: *As a pioneer of cancer patient advocacy, you gave time and energy to Europa Donna and to the breast cancer world. What does this bring to your role as Health Commissioner?*

SK: Being a breast cancer patient and patient advocate has been part of my journey in the area of health for over twenty years. This could not but influence my life in the public sphere from my time as a parliamentarian in Cyprus and now as European Commissioner. I firmly believe patients need to have a central seat at the table when decisions about them are made, because their voices need to be heard. Equally, I have learned that we all need to work together with all stakeholders to bring about change. This means bringing together patients, scientists, decision makers, industry, etc. This is the only way we can bring change. That has always been my belief as an advocate and it continues to be my compass now in my role as Commissioner.

CW: *Most politicians are men. Do you as a woman struggle more than your male colleagues to combine your political position with your personal and family life?*

SK: Equality is a founding principle of the EU and an integral part of our Charter of Fundamental Rights. I am very proud to be part of the first European Commission led by a woman, in the most gender-balanced Commission College we have ever had. On a personal note, I was lucky with the fact that I had supportive parents, and a supportive husband and children, so my gender was not limiting. But many women in the world are not so fortunate, and I have been witness to this discrimination – it is for these women that we must act. Gender equality requires political will and political vision. And it requires us all to be the strongest advocates for gender equality. This is a cause I have championed in the past, and which I will continue to champion for as long as I am in public life