

# MEPs join forces against cancer

→ Anna Wagstaff

Europe could do so much more to boost cancer research and ensure all its citizens get good quality treatment. Now a group of politicians has got together to make sure it does.

A group of around 30 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have got together to launch MEPs Against Cancer. The new forum (which abbreviates to MAC) describes itself as an all-party informal group, committed to promoting action on cancer as an EU priority, and harnessing European health policy to that end.

The forum is headed up by a triumvirate – Alojz Peterle, Adamos Adamou and Liz Lynne – that includes patient, oncologist and campaigner, and is representative of both the regions of Europe and the political spectrum of the Parliament.

Peterle, who spearheaded the formation of MAC, comes from Slovenia. He was prime minister when Slovenia declared its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, and has spent the last couple of years helping to hammer out the ill-fated EU constitution. Four years ago he was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which he fought by making radical changes to his lifestyle. He has since been declared free of the disease. Peterle

believes widespread negative attitudes that see cancer as an automatic death sentence can fatally undermine the determination of patients to survive and sap the political will to improve standards of care. “My personal priority is to get more and more awareness among MEPs in the European Parliament and also among MPs in the Member States, because with legislation we can influence a lot.”

Adamou comes from Cyprus, and is an oncologist by profession. He is a member of the Cyprus Anticancer Association, and has a track record of urging political action on cancer. His priority is to ensure that every European cancer patient has an equal chance of an early diagnosis and good-quality treatment. He argues that the most dramatic improvements in the near future will be made through improved structuring of cancer care services, and wants to see MAC contributing to this goal. “I believe that the MEPs Against Cancer forum will help raise awareness on an issue that affects all of us directly or indirectly, and will aid in the establishment of European standards for cancer prevention and treatment.”

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MEPs Against Cancer can be contacted via the co-chairs: Adamos Adamou, [aadamou@europarl.eu.int](mailto:aadamou@europarl.eu.int); Liz Lynne, [elynne@europarl.eu.int](mailto:elynne@europarl.eu.int); and Alojz Peterle, [apeterle@europarl.eu.int](mailto:apeterle@europarl.eu.int); or through the secretariat: [hildrun.sundseth@ecpc-online.org](mailto:hildrun.sundseth@ecpc-online.org)



MEPs Against Cancer is headed by three co-chairs. From left to right: Adamos Adamou, Liz Lynne and Alojz Peterle

Liz Lynne comes from the UK, where she has a long history as a member of the national parliament working on health in general and cancer in particular, including as co-chair of the All-Party Breast Cancer Group. She feels MEPs have to take up the fight against cancer, not least because 3 million of their constituents are diagnosed every year and 2 million will die from the disease. “Although I believe health policy should be up to individual Member States, it is important for us in the EU to share best practice in research, treatment and care,” she said, giving a special mention also to the need to pressurise governments to aid more research into the disease.

The initiative has been warmly welcomed by the European Cancer Patients Coalition (ECPC), which has offered to run the secretariat. ECPC chairman Lynn Faulds Wood said: “The European Parliament has produced many policies and recommendations which have the capacity to improve the lives of cancer patients across Europe, but we patients know there can be big gaps between policy and putting recommendations into practice. Thousands of lives are being lost unnecessarily to cancer every year, and it is only through our political representatives being prepared to put themselves forward in groups like MAC to campaign for change that we will see major improvements in the way cancer patients are treated.”

Peterle hopes that the MEPs in MAC will not only play a legislative role, considering and intervening on the many draft directives that impact in one way or another on cancer, but will

also form a bridgehead to their own national governments, which is the level at which many of the key decisions will be taken. The European Council Recommendation on Screening for Cancer, he says, is a case in point. Though the European Commission has adopted the recommendation as a political priority, it cannot insist on its implementation by Member States – that decision will be up to national parliaments.

There are many issues, however, that MEPs will be able to influence directly. Jan G, a cancer patient whose life may have been saved because he fought his way into one of the early imatinib (Glivec) trials, hopes that public access to information about clinical trials in Europe will be one of them.

Jan, who sits on the board of the ECPC, points out that when cancer patients develop resistance to existing drugs, getting early access to an experimental drug could save their life. Though Europe now has a clinical trials database (EudraCT), set up by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), patients cannot access it to find out about trials they may be eligible for. “It is one of my hopes that MEPs Against Cancer will understand the importance of transparency on basic data on clinical trials for patients,” he says.

Whether or not MAC takes up this issue, Peterle is clearly committed to working with patient groups. “I think it is important that MEPs are related more closely with organisations such as the ECPC, because I think those groups should feel the support of politicians. Together we will do more, I’m sure.”