

## Integrating Pain Management into EU Health Policy: Strategic Insights from the 2024-2029 Political Guidelines

On 18 July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen, newly re-elected for a second term as President of the European Commission, presented her Political Guidelines for the 2024-2029 term. These guidelines highlighted the importance of a faster, simpler, more focused, united, and supportive Union for citizens and companies. Von der Leyen asserted that these guidelines were a blueprint for a stronger and more unified Union, urging the necessity of collective action to build a more resilient Union for the future. The document outlined key policies to drive innovation, support economic growth, and address global challenges, such as climate change and health crises, serving as a roadmap for the Commission's upcoming priorities.

Of particular interest to SIP was the guidelines' attention to pain management, marking a significant milestone as it addressed pain directly in a document of such significance. The proposed Critical Medicines Act was especially notable as it aims to reduce dependencies on critical medicines and ingredients. Von der Leyen emphasised the need for a diversified supply chain and the urge to "complete the European Health Union with (...) access to the most advanced treatments, more resilient health systems and strategic inventories of key medicines" (von der Leyen, 2024).

Further, the document highlighted the significance of the EU's work to build more resilient health systems. The document also highlighted the Commission's plans to work on preventive health, including the impact of digitalisation on mental health, particularly in the workplace. It also addressed cardiovascular diseases, having the potential to build upon the successful framework of the Beating Cancer Plan.

The document further underscored the importance of supporting individuals and strengthening our societies and social model. The emphasis of the European Social Model, including an Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Social Pillar, focused on the impact of digitalisation on work-life balance and mental health. The Quality Jobs Roadmap aimed to improve working conditions, enhance job training, and facilitate fair transitions.

Von der Leyen also proposed a significant increase in research funding to drive innovations that would contribute to scientific excellence. This includes establishing a Union of Skills, focusing on investment, adult and lifelong learning, skill retention and the recognition of different types of training to enable people to work across the EU. The plan addressed the worrying decline in performance and the lack of qualified teachers in science-related areas and aims enhance vocational education and training (VET). A European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training was proposed to increase the number of individuals with secondary VET degrees.

Therefore, the focus on the European Health Union, mental health, and other non-communicable diseases and research spending, suggested that future policies will strengthen healthcare resilience; promote advanced treatments; and foster innovation. These developments will impact the allocation of healthcare funding, shape regulatory frameworks and spur new collaborative initiatives across the EU.

The document explicitly addressed pain management as part of the EU's healthcare priorities, marking a significant milestone for the pain community. It highlighted the issue of shortages in critical medicines, including "*painkillers*", making this the first instance where pain has been mentioned in a document of such significance. The proposed introduction of a "*Critical Medicines Act*" aims to tackle the reduction of dependencies relating to critical medicines and ingredients.

SIP will endorse and engage on the Critical Medicines Act. SIP will support the introduction of the Critical Medicines Act and emphasise the importance of this legislative step in addressing pain management shortages and ensuring access to essential pain relief medications. The aim should be to expand beyond 'painkillers' to a wider discussion on pain management patient needs and gaps.

Secondly, SIP will continue to actively engage with EU Institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as with the relevant MEPs. SIP offers expertise in pain mechanisms, characteristics, and diagnosis and will suggest solutions to enhance pain treatment access, education, research, and management. This engagement includes reaching out to MEPs interested in health and pain, providing them with detailed information on pain research and data on how the shortages of pain management treatments and skills affect patients and healthcare systems, and seeking their support in shaping effective policies.

Furthermore, SIP supports the increased research spending proposed in the guidelines. The organisations advocate for dedicated funding and initiatives to advance pain management research and treatment innovations. For instance, SIP will continue to monitor the development of AI healthcare technologies, ensuring that pain management is considered within the broader digital health agenda. Moreover, SIP will continue to monitor the proposed establishment of the Union of Skills, which includes recognising different types of training. SIP will also continue to focus on the impact of digitalisation on pain management, particularly with regards to enhancing treatment accessibility and improving patient care through technological advancements.

Finally, SIP will closely analyse the upcoming Health Mission Letter and together with the SIP National Platforms and SIP Stakeholder Forum, will decide SIP's objectives and priorities for 2025.