

The Societal Impact of Pain (SIP) Response to the Mission Letter of the Incoming Health Commissioner

On 17 September 2024, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, issued a Mission Letter to the newly appointed Hungarian Commissioner-designate for Health and Animal Welfare Olivér Várhelyi. Even though the Commissioner has yet to be approved by the European Parliament, the letter outlined the responsibilities assigned to the Commissioner and restates the priorities established in the Political Guidelines from 18 July 2024. While Várhelyi's confirmation remains uncertain, the mission letter is likely to apply for the most part to any replacement candidate that may emerge. In the Mission Letter, von der Leyen highlighted several key areas for the Health and Animal Welfare Commissioner to focus on over the next five years. Some of these areas are of particular interest to SIP. Notably, the Letter reaffirmed the proposed **Critical Medicines Act**, aimed at tackling shortages of medicines and medical devices while ensuring affordable supply. It also emphasised the necessity of ensuring the availability and competitiveness of **medical devices**, including enhancing the implementation of the existing framework and evaluating **potential legislative adjustments**.

Furthermore, the letter addressed the development of a Plan for Preventative Health designed to foster a comprehensive approach to health promotion and disease prevention throughout the life course. Investment in effective preventative measures was expected to alleviate the burden of non-communicable diseases, thereby supporting healthcare systems and technological advancements. The letter also proposed the **continuation of the Beating Cancer Plan (BCP)** and the formulation of a unified strategy for addressing other health issues, including **mental health, cardiovascular diseases, degenerative illnesses, autism, and other non-communicable diseases**. Lastly, von der Leyen emphasized the significance of the **European Health Data Space** and encourages the Commissioner to promote the integration of **artificial intelligence** by providing precise and timely guidance on its application throughout the medicine lifecycle.

Although the Political Guidelines for the 2024-2029 Commission, published by von der Leyen on 18 July 2024, included the term '*painkillers*,' the Mission Letter did not specifically reference pain or pain medication. Nevertheless, SIP identified several opportunities for involvement, particularly in areas related to policy developments and healthcare access.

SIP will proactively engage with the development of the Critical Medicines Act, emphasising its significance in addressing pain management shortages and ensuring access to essential pain relief medications. In line with SIP's broader message of multimodal and patient-centred pain care, it is crucial to communicate this message to the EU Commission and EU Parliament, highlighting the impact of pain research on patient outcomes and healthcare systems.

Furthermore, SIP will support the implementation of the BCP while also advocating for SIP's messages and priorities to be included in strategies in other health areas, such as mental health and cardiovascular diseases, and other non-communicable diseases, ensuring that the complexities of pain management are adequately represented in new policies.

Lastly, continuous engagement with the European Health Data Space will remain essential. By collaborating with sibling organisations where ICD-11 has made a positive impact, and the EU Commission, SIP can help ensure the regulatory framework is effectively implemented, facilitating data-driven improvement in pain management practices. SIP's recent involvement in the WHO-FIC European Network could be of great value in this next phase.