



EU health experts take to the road to boost cancer screening and prevention

The EU's Cancer Mission Bus Roadshow is bringing experts in cancer prevention and early detection to communities across Europe, as part of a push to improve the lives of millions.

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In the village of Lerești, in the centre of Romania, a bus with a purpose pulled up last August. Having already travelled through Lithuania and Poland, it was on the third of its five stops in Romania, on a mission to raise awareness of cancer – both ways to prevent it and options for treatment.

“This village has a lot of elderly people, with only three family doctors and limited access to healthcare,” said Dr Marius Geantă, president of the Center for Innovation in Medicine (InoMed) in Bucharest. “The bus gave people here a rare chance to engage with experts.”

Engaging citizens

Over the summer of 2024, the Cancer Mission Bus Roadshow visited 15 stops across Lithuania, Poland and Romania, attracting 16 800 visitors. Its aim was to help increase knowledge of cancer and cancer prevention, as well as screening, particularly in more remote rural areas.

This roadshow is part of the EU's [Cancer Mission](#), which aims to significantly improve the lives of cancer sufferers and their families.

“We have set a target of improving the lives of 3 million people by 2030, concentrating on prevention, treatment and quality of life for cancer patients and survivors,” said Joanna Drake, head of the EU Cancer Mission.

Drake acknowledges that a big part of the bus roadshow was about engaging communities. Over 66 different organisations were involved in supporting the roadshow, including national and local authorities, hospitals and

patient organisations. Such involvement could help to overcome fragmentation and create more partnerships and joined-up thinking.

“It’s about the presence and dynamic you create and harnessing the involvement of both practitioners and national authorities,” said Drake.

Now the intention is to take the roadshow to as many EU countries as possible after the initial three-country pilot.

Drake also highlighted the important multiplier effect that the roadshow has had on raising awareness. In addition to in-person visitors to the bus, another 11 million people interacted with the roadshow via social media, and news about the events was broadcast on TV, radio and the internet.

Building hope

When the bus arrived in Lerești, people were ready. This was thanks to the effective networking and planning carried out earlier as part of a multi-country EU-funded initiative called 4P-CAN, coordinated by Geantă.

The aim of the 4P-CAN team is to actively involve citizens and local decision-makers in designing and implementing personalised cancer prevention initiatives. It is doing so through an approach called Living Labs, through which they collect and analyse socio-demographic and health data from local residents.

“The day the bus stopped in Lerești, we activated our networks of citizens and local stakeholders in the community, who mobilised people to visit,” said Geantă.

“For primary cancer prevention, this should be the approach: to go in at the community level, interact with citizens and understand how the local authorities can be activated.”

The message was also predominantly a positive one. With a combination of healthy living, preventative screening and improved treatment plans, more people can avoid the most devastating impacts of dealing with cancer.

“What I found interesting was the emphasis on prevention and not viewing cancer as a death sentence,” said one visitor to the bus in Romania. “I met two survivors – one of them a girl who said that by having annual screenings, she discovered the cancer at an early stage, followed the necessary treatments and her body responded very well. She was full of life.”

In addition to the Living Lab in Lerești, a second will be established in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, giving citizens there the opportunity to share their attitudes, perceptions and behaviours related to cancer prevention and a healthy lifestyle.

Working together

In the EU, 2.7 million people are diagnosed with cancer annually, according to the European Commission, a number predicted to reach 3.2 million by 2040 without further action.

Drake pointed to estimates that as many as 40% of cancers could be prevented or cured if detected earlier. The problem, she said, is that participation in screening programmes is still too low. That is why raising awareness, particularly in more remote areas, is so important.

“Europe is not a level playing field, not only in awareness, but also in accessibility to diagnostics and treatments,” said Drake. “Reaching out to people where they are can help them to do the right thing at the right time.”

According to Drake, the EU can make an important contribution to the fight against cancer alongside national authorities, research institutes and healthcare facilities. Part of this is through funding of course.

“Over the past three to four years, we have already allocated nearly €500 million to advance cancer prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and quality of life for patients – and also the survivors,” said Drake.

Another, perhaps equally important, aspect though is its role in creating and building partnerships between research and public health policy, and mobilising communities.

“We want to enhance quality of life by bringing together research and public health policies – which is, by the way, not always the case – and actively engaging with the EU Member States and communities at large,” she added.

Hubs for change

The need to improve communication and coordination on cancer, both within and between different countries, is something that Anabela Isidro, a microbiologist and board member at the Agency for Clinical Research and Biomedical Innovation in Lisbon, Portugal, is keenly aware of.

Isidro is coordinating an EU-funded collaboration called ECHoS that involves over 60 organisations in 30 countries to set up National Cancer Mission Hubs across Europe. Their aim is to help ensure that national and local policymaking reflects current cancer research and healthcare efforts.

“In other words, we want to break down silos and inequalities,” said Isidro.

“The hubs are a way to ensure we help countries not at the same speed as others in building the right structures to implement the EU Cancer Mission. We also want to work with regions within countries, because there are different realities from region to region.”

For Isidro, the Cancer Bus Roadshow was a compelling way of engaging people and she shared her hope that initiatives such as these could lead to big change.

“We hope that by 2030, we will have a real improvement in the lives of people living with cancer and their families.”

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