

EUnetCCC: Rising to the growing challenge of cancer in Europe

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Editorial

According to the most recent estimates of the European Cancer Information System (ECIS) [1] cancer is the second cause of death in Europe [2] and the number one cause of death among Europeans under 65 years of age [3,4]. It is estimated that 1 in 2 Europeans will develop cancer in their lifetime and that 1 in 5 will die because of cancer [3]. Moreover, despite Europe representing only 9% of the world's population, it accounts for 20.3% of cancer related deaths and 23.4% of cancer diagnoses [5].

Still according to the ECIS, [1] approximately 2.74 million new cancer cases were reported in Europe 2022 and very recent estimates indicate that this number could be in excess of 3.24 million by 2040 [5,6] “posing a substantial challenge to public health and affecting long-term quality of life” [5].

Also in 2022, approximately 1.29 million cancer deaths were reported in Europe, with significant trends and disparities observed between Western Europe and Eastern Europe: [5] for example, Central and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Latvia, had higher cancer mortality rates than Western and Northern European countries, resulting from inequalities in terms of quality of health care, early detection/diagnosis and socioeconomic conditions [5].

In 2020, 2.7 million people in the European Union (EU) were diagnosed with cancer and another 1.3 million lost their lives due to the disease, including more than 2,000 young people [7]. It was then considered that, unless decisive measures were taken quickly, cancer “would increase by 24% by 2035, becoming the leading cause of death in the EU” [7].

Considering that, since the early 1990s, “personalised medicine (...) has radically changed patients' prognoses”, [8]—“research and innovation, such as mRNA3 technologies, alongside digital technologies, have dramatically advanced our understanding of cancer initiation and progression, prevention and diagnosis” [8], the EU urgently needed a “renewed commitment to cancer prevention, treatment and care that recognises the growing challenges, and opportunities to overcome them, including the developments in cancer care” [8], and also to respond to the epidemiological growing challenge of cancer and its implications for public health described above, the European Commission (EC) launched, in 2021, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan [8]. The aim of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan is covering all phases of cancer being structured around four main areas of action: 1) cancer prevention; 2) cancer's early detection; 3) cancer diagnosis and treatment; 4) quality of life of cancer patients or cancer survivors [8]. “Most importantly of all, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan places the interests and well-being of patients, their families and the wider population at its heart, every step of the way” [8].

Europe's Beating Cancer Plan includes 10 emblematic initiatives (flagships) and multiple supporting initiatives [8]. The European Network of Comprehensive Cancer Centres (EUnetCCC) [9] is the materialization of the 5th flagship of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan: launched in October 2024,

it consists of a Joint Action (under the EU4Health Programme)—a pan-European consortium coordinated by the French National Cancer Institute (INCa), involving the 27 EU Member States and 4 associated states (Iceland, Norway, Moldova, and Ukraine)—aiming to establish a cohesive network of Comprehensive Cancer Centres (CCCs) across the EU and the aforementioned 4 associated European States [9]. EUnetCCC is an initiative which seeks to ensure that by 2028, 90% of eligible cancer patients have access to high-quality, comprehensive care, thanks to a network of at least 100 certified structures, with at least one CCC established in every Member State by 2028 [9]. EUnetCCC builds upon previous Joint Actions, under flagship 5, like CraNE [10].

EUnetCCC will facilitate the adoption of quality-assured diagnostics and treatments, including training, research, and clinical trials, across the EU [8]. Cross-border collaboration will improve patient access to high-quality diagnostics and care and the latest innovative treatments and can also contribute to patient mobility to ensure appropriate treatment for patients with more complex cancers [8]. The underlying vision of EUnetCCC is a Europe in which every cancer patient, regardless of their location, benefits from equitable access to state-of-the-art medical care and the most advanced therapeutic innovations [9].

Bringing together already 163 partner institutions from 31 countries, EUnetCCC aims to advance cancer care through an inclusive certification framework, sustainable cross-centre partnerships emerging through a membership organisation, the seamless integration of cutting-edge research with clinical practice, and orchestrating network-based collaboration between CCCs to enhance advancement of care and research [9].

To achieve this, EUnetCCC is structured into 9 dedicated Work Packages (WPs) each focusing on a key aspect of building a strong, collaborative European cancer network to drive this mission forward [9]. The nine dedicated Work Packages (WPs) are: WP1—Coordination; WP2—Dissemination/Communication; WP3—Evaluation; WP4—Sustainability; WP5—Inclusion, Certification and Adherence to EUnetCCC; WP6—Strengthening Capacities and Quality Improvement in EUnetCCC; WP7—Governance, Membership and Engagement of EUnetCCC; WP8—Development of Network Activities; WP9—Support the Implementation of Comprehensive Cancer Networks (CCCNs) to Ensure Comprehensive, High-Quality Cancer Care [11] Each WP is led by a consortium partner with recognised expertise [11].

With this bold commitment, EUnetCCC is set to transform the landscape of comprehensive cancer care and establish new benchmarks for excellence, equity, and innovation throughout Europe [9].

To be considered comprehensive, a cancer centre must integrate prevention, treatment, research, and education, while sharing a unified vision of quality standards [12]. Cross-border collaboration between CCCs is a critical infrastructure to promote equity and accelerate joint progress in cancer care in Europe [12].

EUnetCCC is being developed in close collaboration with relevant patient organisations, other EU-funded projects and European professional communities [12].

The first Annual Meeting of EUnetCCC will take place in Paris on November 6th and 7th 2025, aiming to bring together more than

1,000 delegates from across Europe, under the motto: shaping the future of cancer care, research and education in Europe [13]. The EUnetCCC Annual Meeting is a yearly event organised to present key developments, share progress made by the network, and foster strategic dialogue among all partners and stakeholders [13]. Each edition will serve as a forum to assess achievements, identify challenges, and guide the next phase of implementation [13.] In this first Annual Meeting of EUnetCCC a White Paper on governance, sustainability and integration in the European Health Union will be presented [12].

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