



Speech by Commissioner Thyssen Conference on carcinogens, 23 may

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be here, among so many experts on a theme that is extremely important to me personally, and I am glad to say, to the European Commission as a whole.

One of the main objectives of our work in the Commission is to create a Europe worthy of a social triple A rating: That means that economic strengthening and social progress go hand-in-hand. It means improving the lives of our citizens, while boosting our competitiveness. It means investing in the prevention of accidents and occupational diseases, and safeguarding workers' health throughout their working lives.

Over the past 50 years, a solid body of law on occupational safety and health has been building up from the early provisions protecting steel and coal workers - to form a wide range of legal instruments protecting against risks throughout working life.

What we are here to speak about today is the single biggest health risk to workers in the European Union: and that is cancer. The number of deaths attributed to occupational cancer in our Member States is now reported at over 100,000 a year. That



is more than half of the total amount of work related deaths in the EU.



While there is no such thing as zero risk – neither in life nor at work, we have the duty to act where we can to reduce the risk and save workers' lives.



Our approach is a preventative one. Because our best weapon against cancer is to stop it before it begins. Cancers caused by work can and should be prevented by reducing or eliminating the exposure that leads to the disease. This is a simple but effective response to the complexity of the disease that is cancer.



Proposal to amend the Carcinogens & Mutagens Directive



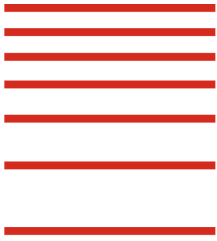
That was the basic logic behind the proposal which we in the European Commission adopted 10 days ago. We want to tackle head on the exposure to 13 cancer-causing chemicals.



Therefore, we propose to add new or amend their limit values in the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. These limit values set a maximum concentration for the presence of a chemical carcinogen in the workplace air.



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Our proposal follows wide ranging discussions with scientists, employers, workers, Member State representatives and labour inspectorates.



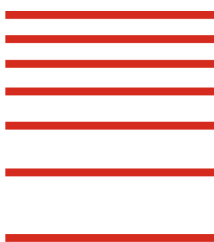
The most pressing example of this is respirable crystalline silica. Quartz is the most common form of crystalline silica and it is the second-most-abundant mineral in the Earth's crust. The problem arises when it is broken down into breathable-size particles as workers chip, cut, drill, or grind objects that contain crystalline silica.




For many years, it has been known that prolonged inhalation of RCS is an important cause of occupational lung cancer and a specific type of lung damage called silicosis. In fact, silicosis is the world's oldest known occupational disease. Our proposal will make a difference for workers exposed to this dust, especially in the construction sector which represents almost 70% of all exposed workers.




Our proposal also supports social partner agreements. This is notably the case for example for RCS. A social partner agreement, also known perhaps to experts here in the room as the NEPSi agreement, already exists. It offers practical guidelines to better manage the risk of RCS on the work floor. However, it isn't binding and doesn't apply to all sectors where exposure occurs, and in




particular not to the construction sector where the risk is highest. Setting binding limits – as we do in our proposal – is therefore crucial.




The benefits...to business, to public authorities and to people



Our proposal provides a win-win-win: for workers, businesses, and Member States.



First and most importantly, it will make a huge difference for workers and their families. The step we take today will save 100,000 people in the next 50 years from early death, avoiding the suffering and costs that go along with these cancers.



Secondly, it will bring benefits for businesses too. Our proposal will give employers the guidance they need to protect their workers better, which I believe they genuinely want to do. And they will be able to hold onto their healthy and skilled workforce for longer.

In addition, the new limit values will provide benchmarks to improve compliance and enforcement, ensuring EU-wide minimum standards of protection. This will also effectively contribute to a 'level playing field' for workers and business across Europe. Consequently, this helps to prevent a race to the bottom and instead contributes to upward



social convergence between our Member States - a crosscutting priority of this Commission.




Thirdly, for the Member States too, the proposal will have a positive financial impact. It will reduce the healthcare costs related to cancer treatment and rehabilitation. There will be a further positive knock-on effect through lower expenditure needed to cushion the associated inactivity, early retirement and compensation for recognised occupational diseases or efforts to reintegrate in the labour market.

The proposal will also benefit the economy at large by increasing labour supply - not only the person affected but also his or her carer. The end-result is therefore improved labour productivity and a lighter burden on public finances.

But the most important benefit is and remains of course for the workers themselves, and for their families. I have known the difficulties first-hand, as a cancer survivor.

The next steps

Ladies and gentlemen, with our proposal, we are renewing our campaign to tackle work-related cancer in the EU.



I would also at this point like to express my gratitude to the Dutch EU Presidency and Minister Asscher in particular for his commitment to our cause and organising this conference today.

In this initial phase, we have proposed to introduce limit values for 13 priority chemical agents to which around 20 million EU workers are exposed. Let me stress however that the Commission's work does not end here.

We will continue assessing new and emerging risks in the future and update our existing legislation accordingly. This also means assuring that our legislation on Occupational Health and Safety generally remains fit for purpose.

How we deal with new risks is also a central question in our consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The health and safety of our workers remains a priority every day.

Conclusion

Minister, ladies and gentlemen; this European Commission is taking steps to safeguard Europe's economic recovery, but at the same time, we are pushing for a more 'social' Europe. That means enabling our citizens to fulfil their potential on the labour market, and to participate more fully in



society. A prerequisite for both is the protection of the health and safety of our workers.



We already have a Framework Directive with this aim, a Directive to protect workers against chemical agents and the existing Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. But the new rules we now propose reflect the latest scientific evidence and draw on preparatory work by the EU scientific and advisory committees - including social partner consultation.



We believe that these new or updated limit values are an objective measure for employers, workers and enforcement bodies to ensure compliance with the Directive. This will contribute to fewer new cases of occupational cancer and provide a 'level playing field' for businesses through EU-wide minimum standards of protection. The proposal therefore means a more efficient system of worker protection, as well as improving fairness and functioning of our single market.



Minister, ladies and gentlemen, I look forward to our cooperation on driving down work-related cancer across the EU and wish you the best for the rest of this conference. Thank you.