



AN URGE TO ACT

Transforming EU Continence Health: A Manifesto for Policy Reform

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A Hidden Challenge

Around 55-60 million Europeans suffer from continence health problems. This is a pervasive health issue significantly affecting patients and their loved ones, national health systems, the economy, the environment, and society. The debilitating and often chronic consequences of continence problems are felt across gender, age, and socio-economic backgrounds, and can result in a serious negative impact on individuals' quality of life. Physical, psychosocial and economic consequences for patients and their carers are a barrier to full participation in society. Comorbidities are common and diseases such as prostate cancer, bladder cancer and cervical cancer and their treatment can cause continence problems, which increases morbidity significantly.

Optimal continence health should be a reality for everyone. There are many ways to improve continence health, through increased prevention, better care, access to supportive interventions including treatment, and more inclusive environments. Much more should be done to reduce the direct expenses, and the burden on patients, their carers, and on society.

We must recognise that risk of continence problems often correlates with conditions that develop or intensify as people age and that the burden of long-term non-professional care still falls disproportionately on women.

Key Issues

Interventions to prevent, manage, and even cure continence problems are not currently implemented to their full extent. Associated healthcare costs, lost productivity, and reduced quality of life place significant burdens on individuals, their caregivers and families, and society.

Health professionals and informal caregivers are making every effort within the existing constraints of different health systems,

however, current systems are not yet fully adapted to support continence care. Policies and laws in Europe and EU Member States tend to neglect continence care, despite its prevalence, serious nature, and availability of solutions.

If no action is taken to support continence health, incontinence will become a major health problem in Europe, worsened by an ageing society. The economic burden in the European region is estimated at €40 billion in 2023, and incontinence is predicted to have cost a total of €320 billion by 2030 if no action is taken. The year-on-year cost is expected to continue rising, reaching €49.5 billion for the year 2030. It is time to take action and transform this neglected issue to address the continence health challenge Europe is facing.

We, the signatories of "Transforming EU Continence Health: A Manifesto for Policy Reform" call for concrete policy changes that recognise the importance of patient-centred continence care. We call on European and national policymakers to:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive EU continence health strategy**
Release a patient-centred continence health strategy that facilitates knowledge-sharing and provides a framework for action in EU Member States. This evidence-based strategy should include provisions for research and innovation funding and infrastructure changes, as well as support actions on prevention, early assessment, diagnosis, and care. Continence health should also be fully integrated into other EU policies.
- 2. Give individuals full and equitable access to continence health solutions**
Facilitate effective pathways to ensure continence needs are met. Ensure widespread reimbursement for continence

health interventions and supportive care: All people living with incontinence must be able to access optimal solutions that work for patients and healthcare systems. Specialised networks of healthcare must be affordable and easily accessible in a timely way, without extra costs for individuals or healthcare systems.

- 3. Guarantee access to toileting facilities in public and private spaces**
Improve public infrastructure urban planning to provide a secure toilet network: safe, hygienic, inclusive, well-located, and accessible toilet facilities. Increase toilet availability, both public and private, to allow individuals to manage their continence health with dignity and autonomy.
- 4. Improve the number and accessibility of trained healthcare providers**
Empower and support increasing numbers of multidisciplinary, trained professionals who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to assess, diagnose, and manage continence problems effectively. This must include a range of specialists such as physiotherapists, nurses, urologists, urogynaecologists, social care and psychological support workers.
- 5. Find and fund sustainable continence care solutions for health systems**
Support the transition of healthcare systems to a socio-ecologically sustainable model. Prioritise and fund ecologically and economically sustainable solutions for patients, including innovations such as ecologically-friendly continence technologies and bio-based protective materials, as well as advancements in waste-handling for single-use continence products.
- 6. Support informal caregivers**
Reduce the care burden by implementing comprehensive support systems for non-professional carers. This must include information and training, psychological support, respite care and financial support to reduce the impact on their work, care, private life, and social protection.

- 7. Understand the interconnections of continence and related health domains**
Increase awareness and promote a holistic understanding of the intricate links between continence health and healthy ageing, pregnancy and childbirth, as well as disease areas like cancer, mental health, neurological problems and several other comorbidities such as obesity, in order to tailor treatment option plans to each individual's needs.
- 8. Improve funding for continence health research**
Invest in research to better understand the efficacy, including cost-effectiveness of continence health interventions and care to improve decision making. Funding should be allocated for research into new interventions for incontinence and improved access to existing interventions.
- 9. Run public awareness campaigns**
Fight stigmatisation and help the general public recognise symptoms and understand how to access available solutions. Information on what good continence health looks like, what support is available, and the importance of pelvic floor health must be made widely available.
- 10. Encourage public-private partnerships to improve continence health**
Support cooperation between the public and private sectors to pool resources, expertise, and knowledge to address the challenges surrounding continence health. Create a synergistic environment where stakeholders work together to improve continence health outcomes, as well as reduce the burden of continence health problems.

