



Time for change: Harnessing the full potential of surgical oncology for cancer patients in Europe

ESSO open letter on behalf of the surgical oncology community

To:

*Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety,
Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth,
Janez Poklukar, Slovenian Minister of Health,
Dr. Bartosz Arłukowicz, Chair of the European Parliament Special Committee on Beating Cancer (BECA) & BECA members
Dr. Véronique Trillet-Lenoir, BECA's Committee Rapporteur
Dr. Cristian-Silviu Buşoi, Chair of the Industry, Research and Energy Committee (ITRE) & ITRE members,*

Lisbon, November 9, 2021.

Dear Commissioners,
Dear Members of the European Parliament,

Surgical oncology specialists from across Europe are currently gathering for the European Society of Surgical Oncology (ESSO)'s 2021 congress (8-10 November), pooling together their expertise and knowledge to shape the future of cancer surgery in Europe. In this context and in light of the upcoming implementation of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, our community would like **to draw your attention to the vital role played by surgical oncology (SO) in cancer care** and the **remaining challenges** to be tackled; and **call on your support** to tackle these efficiently to the benefit of cancer patients.

High-quality surgery remains the best chance to cure solid cancer when diagnosed early. Surgery is also fundamental in preventing (in patients with inherited susceptibility), diagnosing and staging cancer, treating metastatic disease, preserving quality of life and alleviating symptoms. Furthermore, surgical oncology is the most cost-effective treatment for the majority of non-metastasised tumours.

The global demand for SO is substantial and is steadily growing. Currently, it is estimated that around 80% of cancer patients will require surgical intervention during the course of their disease. By 2030, 45 million surgical procedures will be needed worldwide. Yet, less than 25% of cancer patients actually receive safe, affordable or timely surgery. **It is now time to give SO the political and financial attention it deserves**, in order to meet the increasing needs of cancer patients in Europe.

Many obstacles need to be overcome before all cancer patients can benefit from optimal cancer surgery.

Recognition of SO as a specialist discipline

The non-recognition of SO as a specialist discipline in the EU is causing disparities in training, qualifications and practices. Currently, only 8 countries recognise it as a specialty in the European region. Recognising this sub-specialization would help harmonise and raise standards in the discipline across Europe, reduce inequalities in access and improve the quality of patient's care. This could be done, for example, by promoting at European level the

[global curriculum](#) jointly developed by the Society of Surgical Oncology (SSO) and ESSO which aims to address gaps and inadequacies in training.

Support to research and innovation

Research and innovation is another area in which improvement is required to fully unlock the prospects of SO. Despite recent advances, for example in refining the safety, efficacy and cost-effectiveness of surgical procedures, cancer surgery remains highly underfunded in Europe when compared with pharmaceutical research. Yet, the potential to obtain positive outcomes is greater for non-metastasised cancers than for metastasised cancers. European financial instruments and programmes should dedicate more funding to SO research, in particular on local or loco-regional treatment.

Improved screening & early detection to maximise outcomes of SO

The opportunities that arise from early-detection are not fully exploited. Screening programmes can detect cancer at an early-stage, when curative surgery has a greater chance to be successful. Nevertheless, current European recommendations for screening programmes only address colorectal, breast and cervical cancers and their uptake remains low. For instance, only 14% of the European population actively participates in colorectal cancer screening. Research efforts should look into optimising, in close cooperation with surgical oncologists, available screening programmes and support novel approaches to detect cancer early. Additionally, the European recommendations should be extended to other cancer types associated with a high burden, according to the latest scientific evidence.

SO as a key component of multidisciplinary cancer care

Surgical treatment is integral to multidisciplinary care. Comprehensive cancer care centers support patients throughout the whole disease pathway (prevention, treatment, care, clinical trials, rehabilitation) and are associated with better patients', organisational and professional outcomes. Given their knowledge and expertise in the management of solid tumours, surgical oncologists could take on a bigger role in multidisciplinary teams, for example by leading and coordinating the care of patients for a majority of solid tumours. Certification and accreditation of cancers units, involving continuous monitoring and audit, would also help increasing and unifying standards of care provided to patients across Europe.

Cost-effective solutions to improve cancer care, such as SO, need to be recognised and enhanced. The future of cancer surgery – the focus of ESSO 2021 congress – holds many promises to make surgical oncology safer, more efficient and minimally invasive. We now count on your support as European leaders to bring the above recommendations to life and ultimately, help provide high-quality cancer treatment to each cancer patient in Europe.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Domenico M. D'Ugo, ESSO President