

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FIRST CONFERENCE ON HEALTH INEQUALITIES IN THE NEW EU MEMBER STATES

POLICY MAKERS AND PATIENTS – CREATING THE CHANGE

Sofia, September 20-21 – Health inequalities are recognized as a major problem throughout Europe, exacerbated by the current financial crisis. This is being addressed at various levels by the EU Institutions and national administrations and as policies evolve, it is absolutely critical that the patients' perspective is understood and taken on board – that their individual and collective expertise is properly harnessed.

For the first time a Conference will address the challenge of health inequalities in the Southeastern region from the specific perspective of European and national policy makers as well as patients from the 12 new EU member states, alongside candidate and acceding countries. The event is initiated and organised by the **Bulgarian National Patients' Organization (NPO)** with the collaboration of the European Patients' Forum (EPF) and under the patronage of Mrs. Desislava Atanasova, Minister of Health of Bulgaria and Mr. Andrey Kovatchev, MEP.

The Croatian Deputy Minister of Health, Dr. Marijan Cesarik and Mrs. Antoniya Parvanova, MEP and officials from the Bulgarian Health Institutions will welcome the participants at the Conference with a few words concentrating on the topics and desired outcomes of the event.

Our Board Member and Treasurer, Tomasz Szlagowski, will give a welcome address. He declares that: *"This long-term strategic initiative with particular emphasis on the new Member States and Candidate countries will encourage collaboration and exchange of good practice and know-how. Most importantly, it will help to identify and communicate the needs of patients on how they are 'living' health inequalities and their view on moving forward. This conference marks the start of this important process. We hope that the joint efforts, leadership and good will of all stakeholders present at this conference will help to frame a new agenda on health inequalities where patients are truly at the centre."*

The concrete objective of the Conference is to create an opportunity for patients and policy makers to discuss needs and gaps in national healthcare systems, through the experience of the patients and exchange of best practices.

Major European stakeholders, EU health policy makers and experts from national health institutions will highlight the importance of cooperation with patients' organisations in healthcare policy making processes. Dr. Stanimir Hazzardzhiev, Chairperson of the National Patients' Organisation, Bulgaria, will present the results of a preliminary survey on healthcare quality and standards conducted with representatives of 15 patient organisations from the CEE region. The opening session will be followed by a set of patient video interviews shot with patients from the CEE region who will talk about their daily lives and will share their experience with their respective nation's healthcare system.

The following three sessions will concentrate on exchanging and appraising health inequalities data in the CEE region, providing valuable national perspectives to the challenges patients are facing in their daily lives, and will show working models of EU institutional cooperation and patient involvement in European policy making. Mr. Peter Balik, Member at the Central & East European Health Policy Network and Mr. Charles Price, Team Leader for Social and Environmental Health Determinants, DG SANCO, European Commission, will speak before the delegates on available opportunities for cooperation through EU programs and policies.

During the second day of the Conference the delegates will divide into three groups to organise parallel workshops concentrating their efforts toward discussing how EU health strategies meet patient needs, what are the steps toward curbing health inequalities in the EU and what are the steps that patients need to take to become more involved in the healthcare policy making process.

The Conference will conclude with a presentation of the results from the working groups and the adoption of a patient resolution. The purpose of the Resolution is to create and implement a coherent and cost-effective strategy for the new EU Member States as well as the candidate countries to properly address the issue of health inequalities.

One of the main goals of this Conference is to discuss and plan the establishment of a dedicated group of people who will serve as a secretariat body for the organisation and conduct of similar policy events in the CEE region. Indeed the gap in the quality of healthcare in Europe is significant and there is no one-time solution for all the problems. The event's organisers wholeheartedly believe in the continuation of this initiative and future steps have already been made.

The next patients and policy makers' gathering to tackle health inequalities will take place in Poland under the patronage of leading national patients' organizations.

The **National Patients' Organization (NPO)** was founded in January 2010 as an association of patient organizations. NPO is registered under the Law for legal entities as a nonprofit organization carrying out activities for the public's benefit. As the largest association of patient NGO organizations in Bulgaria NPO have more than 70 members - 31 full members involved in the most significant diseases and 43 partner organizations in all 28 regional towns of Bulgaria.

The **European Patients' Forum (EPF)** was founded in 2003 to become the collective patients' voice at EU level, manifesting the solidarity, power and unity of the EU patients' movement. EPF currently represents 55 member organisations - which are chronic disease specific patient organisations working at European level, and national coalitions of patients organisations. EPF reflects the voice of an estimated 150 million patients affected by various diseases throughout Europe.

EPF's vision for the future is high quality, patient-centred, equitable healthcare throughout the European Union.

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For **practical information** about the organisation of the event or if you plan to attend it, please go on NPO website: www.npo.bg