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The European Commission must fulfil their obligation to reduce pharmaceutical pollution

Representing hundreds of environmental and health organisations in all 28 European Union Member States and further afield, 14 NGOs are calling for immediate action and answers as to why the Commission have not yet published a strategic approach to address the pharmaceutical pollution of water.

The strategic approach was promised by September 2015 in a 2013 EC Directive 2013/39/EU. Article 8c of the 2013 directive states: "...the Commission shall, as far as possible within two years from 13 September 2013 develop a strategic approach to pollution of water by pharmaceutical substances".¹

Over 16 months since this missed deadline, HCWH Europe, on behalf of concerned cosignatories, today sent a joint letter to European Commission (EC) President Jean-Claude Juncker, Vice-President Frans Timmermans, Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs, and Fisheries Karmenu Vella, and Director General for Environment Daniel Calleja Crespo – expressing concern at the delay of the strategic approach, and calling upon the European Commission to protect human and environmental health.

It is well known that pharmaceutical residues have been detected in surface water, sewage effluents, groundwater, drinking water, manure, soil, and other environmental matrices globally, including within the European Union.² The presence of pharmaceuticals in water contributes to environmental pollution, impacting on organisms such as fish and vegetation, and may have long-term impacts on human health.³ Pharmaceuticals in water may also contribute to antimicrobial resistance (AMR) - a serious global threat challenging the sustainability of European health systems.⁴

The letter sent today on behalf of civil society is the basis of a new petition as part of the Safer Pharma campaign (www.saferpharma.org), organised by HCWH Europe, to address the delay of the strategic approach which is putting the health of EU citizens and the European environment at risk.

Speaking about the delay, Anja Leetz, Executive Director of HCWH Europe said:

"All experts (including the UN), agree that we are facing a global pharmaceutical pollution problem and we need to minimise the release of medicine into the environment throughout their life cycle: production, use, and disposal. It is unacceptable that the Commission is delaying any action to protect human health and the environment and allowing pollution to continue. It is unacceptable that the Commission delays the process laid down by EU law and we expect the Commission to publish the roadmap swiftly, so we can begin to address the problem of pharmaceutical pollution."

Adela Maghear, HCWH Europe's Pharmaceuticals Policy Officer adds:

"Our drinking water may include an unwanted drug cocktail - a study in the Danube River Basin, spanning 14 EU countries, identified 7,767 chemical compounds, many of which were pharmaceuticals or their transformation products.⁵ With the European Commission delaying to address this problematic issue, can we really expect a healthy future for us and our children?"

Dr. Peter Kälin, President of Doctors for the Environment, Switzerland says:

"Guidelines for minimising the pharmaceutical pollution of water are very important, especially because of antibiotic resistance. By publishing the roadmap the EU can become a leader in the reduction of pharmaceutical pollution, one we hope Switzerland will follow".

Susan Haffmans, Senior Adviser for Pesticides and Veterinary Pharmaceuticals at Pesticide Action Network Germany states:

"Tonnes of antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals like antiparasitica and hormones are used in food producing animals. Those pharmaceuticals contribute to water contamination all over Europe day by day.⁶ The European Commission must finally come up with their strategic approach, one that will secure an effective reduction of pharmaceutical discharge from animal livestock holdings. Such an approach must tackle the problem at its source, by supporting better husbandry that fosters animal health and well-being and subsequently reduce the need for large-scale pharmaceutical use".

Sascha Marschang, Policy Manager at European Public Health Alliance adds:

"It is crucial that the European Commission takes a holistic and coherent approach to pharmaceuticals in the environment, which recognises the important links between water pollution and the proliferation of "superbugs". A strategy on pharmaceuticals in the environment is urgently required, and it must be clearly linked to the follow-up Action Plan on AMR given that resistant bacteria pose a major cross-border threat to health."

- 1 Directive 2013/39/EU: www.eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013L0039
- 2 Aus der Beek T et al. (2015). Pharmaceuticals in the environment: Global occurrences and perspectives www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26666847
- 3 Pharmaceuticals in drinking water, WHO, 2012: www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/2012/pharmaceuticals/en/
- 4 Larsson DGJ et al. (2007). www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17706342
- 5 Storck et al, (2015) *Emerging substances in surface and groundwater*, Joint Danube Survey 3, ICPDR, Vienna. Austria.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

About Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) Europe

HCWH Europe is a non-profit European coalition of hospitals, healthcare systems, healthcare professionals, local authorities, research/academic institutions and environmental and health organisations. It currently has 75 members in 26 countries from the WHO European region, including 17 EU member states. HCWH Europe works to transform the healthcare sector worldwide so that it becomes more ecologically sustainable and a leading advocate for environmental health and justice across the globe. We bring the voice of healthcare professionals to the European policy debate about key issues such as chemicals, climate change and health, green building, sustainable procurement, pharmaceuticals, sustainable food and waste management.

www.noharm-europe.org

About the Safer Pharma campaign

The Safer Pharma campaign aims to:

- Challenge the pharmaceutical industry to take action to reduce their environmental impacts
- Raise awareness amongst healthcare professionals about the problems associated with pharmaceuticals in the environment and letting them know what they can do to help
- Help citizens to understand what they can do to minimise pharmaceuticals in the environment

Organised by Health Care Without Harm Europe, the Safer Pharma campaign website provides information and resources on the topic of pharmaceuticals in the environment, and also features a petition for all to sign, pressuring the European Commission to fulfil their promise and provide a strategic approach to pharmaceuticals in the environment. www.saferpharma.org