



European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC)

European Palliative Care Day 2026 - Policy Brief

14th May 2026

Palliative Care: It's about living, not just dying.

Executive summary

Across Europe, millions of people live with serious illness, including cancer, heart failure, dementia, neurological disease and advanced frailty. Many experience avoidable pain, distress, social isolation and unnecessary hospitalisation because palliative care is introduced too late, or not at all.

Palliative care improves quality of life, supports people with life limiting illness and their families, strengthens health systems and contributes to more efficient use of resources. Yet access to this essential care remains highly unequal across Europe.

European Palliative Care Day 2026 is a call for stronger political commitment to ensure that palliative care is available to everyone who needs it, when they need it.

Why this matters now?

Europe is changing rapidly. Populations are ageing, chronic illness is rising, and more people are living longer with complex conditions such as cancer and neurological disease. At the same time, health systems face workforce shortages, growing demand for home-based care, and increasing pressure on hospitals and emergency services.

These challenges require smarter, more sustainable and person-centred models of care. **Palliative care is an essential part of the solution.** It improves quality of life, supports families, and helps health systems respond more effectively to growing need.

The World Health Organization recognises palliative care as an ethical responsibility of health systems and an essential component of Universal Health Coverage.



Key Messages

1. Supporting people when living with serious illness

People living with serious illness need timely and appropriate support. Palliative care helps people manage symptoms, navigate complex health needs, and continue living as well as possible with the support they need throughout their illness. Health systems, policymakers and communities share a responsibility to ensure that people living with serious illness can access palliative care when they need it.

Investing in palliative care contributes to compassionate and responsive health systems.

2. Supporting families and communities

Serious illness affects not only individuals but also families, caregivers, friends and communities. Palliative care recognises this wider network and works to support both patients and those close to them.

Communities play an important role in care. By strengthening community-based services and support systems, societies can better respond to the needs of people facing serious illness and those who care for them.

3. Providing care through trained palliative care professionals

Palliative care requires skilled and well-trained professionals able to respond to the complex needs of people living with serious illness. Doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, spiritual care providers and many other professionals play a vital role in delivering coordinated and responsive care.

Policymakers, health systems and educational institutions must ensure that palliative care education is integrated into health training and professional development.

Investing in palliative care training strengthens health systems and improves access to appropriate care.

What can the European Union do?

While health systems remain a national responsibility, the European Union plays an important role in cooperation, funding and policy coordination.

The European Union can play a vital role by supporting cooperation between Member States, strengthening workforce education, investing in research and innovation, integrating palliative care into healthy ageing strategies, linking it to cancer, dementia and chronic disease policies, and helping reduce inequalities in access across Europe.



Policy recommendations for European Union decision-makers

1. Recognise palliative care as essential care

Include palliative care in European Union health, ageing, disease and care strategies.

2. Promote earlier access

Encourage the integration of palliative care based on need, alongside disease-modifying or curative treatment.

3. Invest in education and workforce capacity

Support multidisciplinary training across health and care professions.

4. Strengthen families and carers

Promote practical, social and psychological support for families and carers.

5. Expand community-based care

Encourage home care, integrated care pathways and local services.

6. Reduce inequalities

Support equitable access regardless of diagnosis, age, geography or socioeconomic status.

7. Support research and innovation

Include palliative care within EU4Health, Horizon Europe and future funding programmes.

Why this can't wait

Demand for palliative care is expected to rise significantly in the coming decade.

Without action:

- avoidable suffering will increase
- families will face greater burden
- hospital pressures will rise
- inequalities will deepen.

With action, Europe can build more humane, resilient and sustainable systems of care.



Call to Action

On European Palliative Care Day 2026, we invite policymakers and communities to champion a Europe where everyone living with serious illness can access timely, high-quality palliative care.

Palliative Care: It's about living, not just dying.

What can you do now?

- Put palliative care in health and social care policies.
- Invest in services and training to ensure access for all.
- Learn more and raise awareness of the benefits of palliative care.
- Speak up for patients, families, and carers who need support.

Together, we can ensure that no one faces serious illness without the care they need.

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For more information

Website: <https://eapcnet.eu/european-palliative-care-day-2026>

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