Replies to additional written questions – Olivér Várhelyi

Question 1

How will you in your actions promote women's rights? What concrete steps will you take to further promote the access and provision of sexual and reproductive healthcare and to improve the situation of women health and ensure that Union health policies promote gender equality in healthcare? The European Parliament supports access to sexual and reproductive healthcare in all Member States. During your confirmation hearing, you referred to limitations of the powers of the EU, however, EU policies can support access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. Will you actively work to improve and update the cross-border healthcare Directive to ensure that people in Member States without any or adequate reproductive healthcare would safely and confidentially receive it in another Member State?

If I am confirmed as Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, I will promote women's rights across my work. In the European Union, every person, including every woman, should have access to quality healthcare.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will work with the Commissioner for Equality to address discrimination and improve gender equality in healthcare, health promotion, and health crisis preparedness. I will aim to do this in a variety of ways. For instance, I will ensure that the EU4Health Programme continues to be key in fighting inequalities in disease prevention, crisis preparedness, and healthcare provision. The European Cancer Inequalities Registry, a flagship initiative under Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, must continue to document inequalities related to several determinants, including gender and I will look at expanding this, for example to cardiovascular diseases. Health crises have a clear equality dimension, so preparedness and response measures must also take this into consideration.

One of the important early initiatives for the new College, set out in the Political Guidelines and also developed by Commissioner-designate Lahbib during her hearing, will be the Roadmap for Women's Rights to be proposed for the next International Women's Day. I will contribute to this work and work with my colleagues to include a strong health dimension.

Sexual and reproductive health plays a key role in gender equality and women's rights. If confirmed, I will therefore work together with the Commissioner for Equality on the post-2025 Gender Equality Strategy on issues related to health, including sexual and reproductive health. I will also work to ensure that the reinforced quality and safety standards set out in the Regulation on Substances of Human Origin are fully implemented and applied to everyone throughout the EU.

In parallel, I will work to ensure full implementation of the Cross-Border Healthcare Directive, to promote cross-border access to healthcare services across the EU. The Commission's evaluation in 2022 showed that barriers to accessing healthcare across borders persist, largely due to how the Directive has been implemented. I will continue the Commission's work to remove barriers to implementation, for example through the digitalisation of healthcare. To improve compliance with the Directive, I will step up dialogue with Member States, so that concerns can be discussed and solutions can be found. By maximising the Directive's potential and strengthening cooperation between Member States, the EU will be able to take a step further towards the European Health Union and towards ensuring women's rights are upheld.

In accordance with the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the organisation and delivery of healthcare and medical services is a Member State competence. However, the EU can take action to complement national policies. This is why the Commission strongly supports Member States' efforts to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals relevant to women's health – universal access to sexual and reproductive care, family planning and education. The Commission's work complements national policies, encourages cooperation, supports Member States in applying their health policies and facilitates exchange of good practices, including through the Steering Group on health promotion, disease prevention and management of non-communicable diseases.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will support the Commissioner for Equality's work to promote women's rights, including as regards their access to sexual and reproductive healthcare no matter where they live in the EU.

Question 2

How will you promote the uptake of EMA-approved vaccines and fight vaccine hesitancy and related disinformation and misinformation in all Member States, including your own? How will you work to ensure that the use of 'loopholes' do not undermine the Union system for approval of safe and effective vaccines? In your reply in relation to the tragedy in Spain, Members understood that HERA already has stockpiles of vaccines for tetanus and dengue ready to deploy. Can you confirm that this is the case?

If I am confirmed as Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, I will be a strong and vocal advocate for the public health benefits of vaccines. As I mentioned during my hearing, more than 1.7 million lives were saved in the EU during the pandemic thanks to COVID-19 vaccines. This is not to mention the millions of more lives saved every year from vaccines against other deadly diseases, such as measles, polio and pertussis. In Europe, vaccines undergo a very thorough scientific assessment prior to their authorisation. People receiving Commission-authorised vaccines can be confident that they are safe and effective. I will work very closely with the EMA and with national authorities to boost public confidence in vaccines, including by ensuring full transparency about new authorisations and the post-authorisation monitoring processes.

All medicines authorised by the Commission, including COVID-19 vaccines, are based on a robust assessment process by the EMA. The EU pharmacovigilance system is one of the most advanced in the world. The system was strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with enhanced monitoring of vaccines in real-world settings.

In a public health emergency, safe and effective medicines and vaccines must be developed and made available across the EU as quickly as possible. The EU already has measures to facilitate, support and speed up the development and granting of marketing authorisations for safe and effective treatments and vaccines. The pharmaceutical legislation allows Member States to issue emergency use authorisations at national level, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the proposed pharmaceutical reform, there is a possibility to grant faster temporary emergency marketing authorisations at EU level to address public health emergencies based on a robust assessment by the EMA, enabling a coordinated EU approach in such situations. If confirmed, I will work closely with the European Parliament and the Council to ensure this possibility becomes a reality as part of the reformed pharmaceutical legislation.

If confirmed as Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, protecting European citizens from the harmful effects of disinformation will be a top priority for me, including in the area of public health. I will work together with my colleagues in the College, to draw on the strong framework already in place, including the European Democracy Action Plan, the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, to address disinformation in large online platforms and search engines, and to support its further development through the Democracy Shield. Monitoring and surveillance of disinformation will also be intensified, in cooperation with Member States and international organisations. To counteract damaging disinformation around vaccination, the Commission will continue to provide citizens with reliable, evidence-based information, integrating the recommendations from the recent report commissioned by

the SANT Committee on reducing the impact of disinformation on Europeans' health. I will work closely with the ECDC, which carries out valuable work to increase the outreach of vaccination programmes and to address related mis- and disinformation and which I firmly support. I will also work with healthcare providers and other reliable organisations to amplify our messages and to encourage citizens to make vaccination decisions based on reliable, scientific information.

But fighting vaccine hesitancy is not enough. If confirmed, I will also support measures to ensure access to vaccination and leave nobody behind. The Commission is funding a major project under the EU4Health programme, entitled Overcoming Obstacles to Vaccination, which is piloting good practices to address structural barriers to vaccination.

The Commission is ready to support Spain in the aftermath of the terrible floods in Valencia and the surrounding regions. The Commission has already activated its Copernicus satellite system to help coordinate rescue teams and offered to activate the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, as soon as a request from the Spanish national authorities is received. I can confirm that, should Spain require assistance, the Commission can help Spanish authorities to access a supply of medical countermeasures to respond to the rise of infectious diseases resulting from the floods. EU-level stockpiles contain vaccines against tetanus and other relevant medical countermeasures.

Question 3

Some targets in the Council Recommendation on stepping up EU actions to combat antimicrobial resistance in a One Health approach are not on track to be met. How you will work to change track on these targets, including through collaborating with Member States on actions in their national plans, take further measures to promote prudent use and stewardship of antimicrobial? Parliament considers that action is urgently needed and simply monitoring Member States progress until 2027 is not sufficient. Will you consider further legislative actions before 2027 and how will you monitor that national action plans are accompanied with sufficient funding to reach 2030 targets? EU as a whole seems to be well on track to reduce significantly animal antimicrobial consumption, in particular thanks to the efforts of EU farmers. However, taking into account Member States different starting points, how would you ensure that reduction margins existing in some Member States translate into actual decreases in sales and use of veterinary antimicrobials? Besides, how would you improve monitoring by the Member States of antimicrobial resistance and antimicrobial consumption? How would you improve harmonisation of the national strategies to address antimicrobial resistance? Given the seriousness of the challenges at stake, how would you strengthen the relevant import controls and ensure more harmonised implementation across the EU?

I am committed to step up the ongoing work on combating antimicrobial resistance. I believe the EU's goal to reduce antimicrobial use by 2030 is attainable, even if Member States are at different stages and have each adopted targets that reflect their current usage levels. If I am confirmed as Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, I will work hard to meet our ambitious goal through strong cooperation, targeted monitoring, and clear accountability.

If confirmed, I will continue to support the use of a range of instruments to support Member States' actions. The Joint Action on Antimicrobial Resistance and Healthcare-Associated Infections, which was launched in February this year, is already supporting national efforts by providing more than €60 million in funding.

The ECDC carries out monitoring of antimicrobial resistance and antimicrobial use across the EU every year. In addition, the Commission facilitates the exchange of best practices among Member States through the One Health AMR Network, which convenes twice a year. I believe that national strategies should be coordinated within a cohesive EU-wide framework to ensure consistent progress while allowing flexibility for local adaptation.

Where AMR targets are not yet met, the Commission will step up targeted support for Member States' action plans, especially in areas such as infection prevention and control, prudent antimicrobial use and stewardship. Where needed, I will work on recommendations for further action in accordance with the Serious Cross-Border Health Threats Regulation. If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will closely monitor progress, using all means at the Commission's disposal to support Member States in reaching their targets,

I believe that the EU's ambitious goal for halving overall antimicrobial sales for farmed animals and in aquaculture by 2030 is achievable and I will work towards that goal. A reduction of almost 30% in sales has already been achieved.

The Regulation on veterinary medicines lays down a wide range of complementary measures to ensure prudent use of antimicrobials in animals. I will support its implementation to ensure that each Member State contributes meaningfully to reducing overall sales. I will intensify the Commission's audits, as they ensure that rules on the use of antimicrobials in animals are enforced by Member State authorities.

In line with the Parliament's resolution from 2023 on EU action to combat antimicrobial resistance, I will work on measures to improve the health and welfare of food-producing animals in order to decrease the occurrence and spread of infectious diseases in farming and consequently reduce the need for antimicrobial use

I will continue the Commission's work on ensuring accurate and harmonised data, which enables the monitoring of the situation and trends at both EU and national level. Every year, Member States are obliged to collect and report data on sales and use of antimicrobials per animal species. The Commission provides financial support to Member States to equip their IT systems for this data collection. I will draw on this data to inform future action. The Commission also funds training programmes for officials from national competent authorities involved in activities related to the correct use of antimicrobials and related resistance in veterinary/ food sectors, as well as farmers and veterinarians working with food-producing animals on their legal obligations and how they can further reduce the use of antimicrobials.

I will also make sure that rules on imports from non-EU countries contribute to reduced use of animal antimicrobials. Under the current regulatory framework, non-EU countries that wish to export animals and animal products to the EU must respect our rules not to use antimicrobials for growth promotion or the antimicrobials reserved in the EU to treat human infections for those animals and animal products. Only countries which have demonstrated that they comply with EU rules are "listed" as authorised to export to the EU. I will ensure that Commission audits in non-EU countries continue, verifying compliance with EU import requirements.

Question 4

How will you ensure to implement an EU wide comprehensive mandatory food labelling and traceability system that consolidates the various existing voluntary schemes (sustainable and ethical aspects) into a single, clear framework, without additional burdens that would increase prices for consumers? How do you intend to support consensus among Member States on this issue? Are you committed on bringing together front-of-pack nutrition labelling to promote healthy choices? Additionally, how will such a system ensure that consumers are fully informed through extended origin or provenance information on all food products, thereby enhancing consumer protection, reducing food waste, and supporting sustainable practices?

The Food Information to Consumers (FIC) Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council is the basis for guaranteeing a high level of consumer protection in relation to food information. It sets out the rules regarding the provision of mandatory food information and the requirements that food business operators need to respect when providing voluntary food information. Information must not be misleading and must be, where appropriate, based on relevant scientific data.

The "Green Claims" proposal from the Commission provides clarity on environmental sustainability aspects. This proposal, under negotiation between the European Parliament and the Council, entails amongst others specific requirements to ensure that an assessment underlying an environmental claim or label is robust and scientifically sound.

Front-of-pack nutrition labelling is one of the many tools used to inform consumers about the nutritional content of food.

I will work with all stakeholders to provide solutions to facilitate healthier food choices. If confirmed, as a first step, I will engage with all concerned parties on a comprehensive approach that addresses issues including food reformulation, food information, and the marketing of unhealthy food. I will identify areas where additional financial support to Member States may be needed, drawing on the work of the ongoing Joint Action on the Prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases. As communication campaigns at national level can target consumers more effectively, I will further support Member States' efforts to improve consumer awareness about food information.

The FIC Regulation also provides for the mandatory indication of origin for certain foods and the possibility for food businesses to indicate voluntarily the origin of other foods. Some Member States have taken national measures in response to consumer demand. If confirmed, one of my priorities will be addressing such consumer demands for more information on the origin of foods, while ensuring the smooth functioning of the internal market.

Question 5

EU rules on animal welfare are applied quite differently among Member States. According to you, what are the primary obstacles which contribute to these differences in compliance levels, and what specific actions or support would you propose to help farmers in meeting their obligations more effectively? Which implementation challenges do you identify in the current provisions? As Commissioner-designate, how do you intend to modernise the existing regulations on animal welfare and assess the impact of possible changes? Do you think that imports should be included in any such legislation? In this regard, how could we ensure that third countries comply with EU requirements? And how concretely would you fulfil the commitment made during the hearing to ensure a balanced approach that is economically viable for farmers and that does not hinder their competitiveness? In addition, as Commissioner-designate, what are your views on the conclusions of the ANIT Committee on animal transport?

In my view, the primary obstacles to the harmonised application of the current EU animal welfare legislation are the following: the rules are old and often give rise to differing interpretations among Member States; there are considerable differences in Member States' enforcement and a lack of effective sanctions; and animal welfare indicators are not used enough. These factors are clearly identified in the Commission's 2022 fitness check.

These implementation challenges create distortions on the internal market and contribute to an uneven playing field and uneven animal welfare protection. The situation is aggravated by the scattered legal landscape resulting from different national provisions on animal welfare adopted in the last 20 years,.

I will focus on a thorough application of existing rules. I will intensify the work of the Commission to help all parties meet their obligations. So far, this includes training activities (via the "Better Training for Safer Food" programme), communication activities, Commission guidelines such as on pig tail docking and pilot projects to share best practices in areas including transport, the welfare of dairy cows and shifting to non-cage systems for laying hens. In addition, I propose to support the wider use of animal welfare indicators and providing farmers with more data to guide their work. If needed, infringement procedures always remain an option for the Commission.

I confirm that I will propose to the College a review of the legislation on animal welfare as mentioned in my mission letter. I will modernise existing EU animal welfare standards, and in particular deliver on the Commission's follow-up to the European Citizens' Initiative "End the Cage Age". My first step will be to engage in discussion with everybody concerned, including farmers, to discuss different solutions and issues such as transition periods and financial support. I will take into account the needs of remote rural areas. My aim will be to make sure that these improvements do not disadvantage EU farmers. .

To ensure that third countries comply with EU or equivalent requirements, we could use the same approach as in the area of animal welfare at the time of killing. Based on that legislation, meat imported into the EU must come from animals slaughtered under conditions equivalent to those of the EU and be accompanied by an import certificate where the competent authority of the country of origin confirms these conditions. In addition, the Commission performs audits in exporting third countries to verify that EU or equivalent requirements are applied.

I believe that the work of the ANIT Committee shows how the European Parliament can provide valuable input for the Commission's work. The Commission's legislative proposal on animal transport incorporates many of the Committee's recommendations. For example, it includes stricter limits for transport to slaughter, additional rules on the transportation of dogs and cats and, for the first time, specific provisions on aquatic animals. If confirmed as Commissioner, concluding the negotiations on this proposal will be a priority for me.