

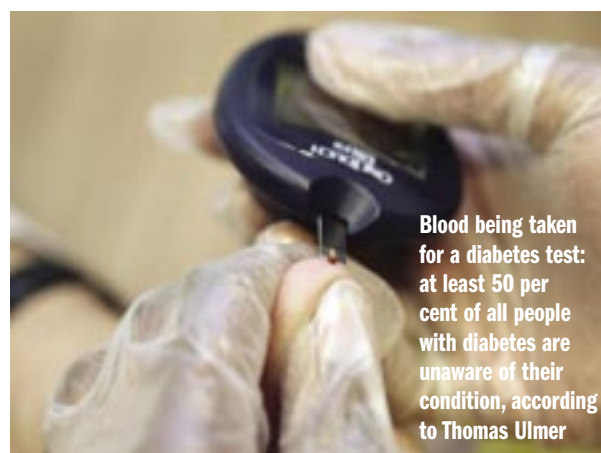
# A diabetic timebomb

Last year diabetes deaths made up six per cent of total world mortality – a figure Thomas Ulmer says can be improved with stronger policies and healthier lifestyles

**D**iabetes is a severe chronic disease and over seven million people in Germany are suffering from it. In the EU it affects around 25 million people. Unfortunately, the estimated number of unknown cases is much higher. According to the WHO, diabetes deaths are likely to increase by more than 50 per cent in the next 10 years without urgent action. There is therefore a strong need to take action at European and at national level to address this diabetic time bomb.

At least 50 per cent of all people with diabetes are unaware of their condition, rising to 80 per cent in some countries. The EU and its member states have an important role to play in this respect. It has been 87 years since the discovery of insulin by the Canadian orthopedist Frederick Grant Banting, who succeeded in isolating the hormone from the pancreas to treat diabetics. Millions of diabetics owe their lives to insulin. Yet many of the world's most vulnerable citizens, including many children, die needlessly because of a lack of access to this essential drug. This is a global shame and we need to address this issue now.

The means exist to strengthen healthcare systems and provide healthcare professionals and the families of those affected by diabetes the education they need to make a significant step forward. And education and information are required especially for children. Currently, over 500,000 children under the age of 15 live with diabetes. We have to raise public awareness of diabetes and to encourage member states to develop national policies for the prevention, treatment and care of diabetes in line with the sustainable development of their healthcare systems, including education and mass media. We need to recognise that diabetes is a chronic, debilitating and costly disease that poses severe risks



Blood being taken for a diabetes test: at least 50 per cent of all people with diabetes are unaware of their condition, according to Thomas Ulmer

for families, EU member states and the entire world. Better treatment can save money and reduce the devastating effects on the economy and development.

Lifestyle changes can prevent a diabetes epidemic. Accordingly, we must get the message across to Europe's citizens that a healthy diet and regular exercise will help them avoid debilitating diseases like this one. That is why I strongly support studies such as 'Rosso in praxi' by Stephan Martin, the medical director of the diabetes and health centre in Dusseldorf, which invites patients to get active in fighting their disease.

In 2007, 3.8 million people worldwide died of diabetes, which is roughly six per cent of total world mortality, about the same as HIV and malaria combined. Let us take a step forward in fighting this terrible burden and reduce the number of deaths.

*World Diabetes Day takes place on 14 November. ★*



Thomas Ulmer is a medical doctor and member of the environment, public health and food safety committee

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