Europe Is Losing the Pharma Investment Race — But the Comeback Is Within Reach: An open letter from the Chairs of AstraZeneca, Boehringer Ingelheim, Chiesi Group, Ipsen, GSK, Novo, Novartis, Roche, and Sanofi

We are proud Europeans. We serve as Chairs of companies born from European science, rooted in laboratories across Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and beyond. Our duty is to safeguard our companies' future so that we can continue to discover and develop life-changing medicines for patients.

The pharmaceutical sector is one of our continent's great post-war achievements. Built on investment in science, world-class universities, and the determination to discover medicines that change lives. Europe gave the world vaccines, pioneered treatments for heart disease, and laid the foundation for today's cancer treatments – transforming public health.

Europe's choice to incentivise discovery built one of our most productive and research-intensive sectors, supporting millions of highly skilled jobs, and generating an EU trade surplus of over €220 billion. The uptake of innovative medicines in Europe returns almost sixfold to the economy through lower hospitalisation costs and healthier working lives. Our sector powers a vast ecosystem spanning discovery, development and manufacturing, while strengthening health systems to manage rising burdens of disease and ageing populations.

But this hard-won inheritance is at risk. In our boardrooms, we see Europe losing ground to global competition. Over $600 billion in pharmaceutical investment has been announced in the US and China in the last two years alone. European governments must create conditions that attract investment in next-generation medicines before it's too late.

Europe's alarm bells are ringing. As Mario Draghi warned, without urgent action, strategic sectors like pharmaceuticals face a 'slow agony' of decline. In 1990, Europe accounted for 43% of global pharmaceutical R&D. Today, it is 31% and falling. Europe's share of commercial clinical trials, which provide vital revenue for public hospitals and improve patient outcomes, has halved in a decade to 9%. China has overtaken Europe in clinical trials, pharmaceutical patents, and the development of new medicines.

For patients, the consequences are clear: around 40% of newly approved therapies never reach European patients. Among those that do, patients wait nearly 600 days for treatment. Cancer survival in Europe trails the US[1]. Too many patients are diagnosed late or treated with medicines that fall short of the standard recommended by medical guidelines.

This is the result of decades in which Europe treated medicines as a cost to suppress rather than one of the best investments a government can make. Outdated systems constrain the use of innovative medicines, arbitrarily cap budgets, and fail to adjust spending for inflation despite rising patient need. Government policies send a powerful signal about how innovation is valued and the priority placed on ensuring that patients can access it.

The message to innovators has been stark: Europe does not value what you do.

[1] World Health Organization, International Agency for Research on Cancer, GLOBOCAN 2022 portal, accessed 8 April 2026 via: https://gco.iarc.who.int/en

The decisions we take have consequences today and for years to come. A single innovative medicine takes more than a decade and around €3 billion of at-risk investment before reaching a patient, with only one or two medicines emerging from every 10,000 candidates synthesised in laboratories. Few sectors face comparable risk over such long horizons. That commitment requires a market that rewards it.

It is becoming more urgent to change course. European leaders must recognise the danger. The EU can play an enabling role by accelerating clinical trials, protecting intellectual property, and adopting sensible digital policies. Crucially, the EU could also provide fiscal flexibility to Member States investing in health and innovative medicines, recognising these returns take time to materialise.

But EU action alone is not enough. The decisive levers lie with national governments: how much to invest in health budgets, how quickly new medicines are assessed and funded, and how to modernise healthcare to better prevent, detect and treat disease.

We ask national leaders to work with us to reverse Europe's declining competitiveness, unleash a new era of medical discovery, and secure health sovereignty. We recognise the fiscal pressures many face. But just like defence or energy, modern medicines should be treated as vital infrastructure and not be left to others to provide.

Opportunities are on Europe's doorstep if governments rebalance decades of underinvestment in innovative medicines and modernise value frameworks to reflect the total value of what these treatments bring to patients, health systems and the economy. In clinical trials alone, Europe could unlock €53 billion and 82,000 jobs by closing the gap with China and the US.

Europe's story does not have to be one of decline and dependency; it can be one of renewal and resilience. That choice belongs to national leaders and all of us as citizens. If we fail to act with ambition, our future will be built elsewhere. But if we choose to invest in health and medicines as strategic assets, Europe will not merely catch up – it can set the pace of global innovation once again and enable Europeans to live longer, healthier lives.

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