



## **European Health Forum Gastein 2009 Focused on the Economic and Financial Crisis**

- **EHFG President Günter Leiner demands the “rationalisation rather than rationing of health services”**
- **Heightened pressure to increase efficiency of and modernise the health care system**
- **Smoking, alcohol, nutrition: impending return of harmful behaviours**

The opening today of the 12<sup>th</sup> European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) taking place from 30 September to 3 October 2009 in Bad Hofgastein was focused entirely on the current financial and economic crisis. 600 participants from 41 countries are taking part in the most important health policy congress for experts and decision-makers in the European Union.

“The economic crisis also poses a serious danger to the quality and functional capacity of the European public health system,” warned EHFG President Günther Leiner in his opening speech to leading representatives of the European public health system. Without rapid and systematic countermeasures noticeable negative consequences for the population of the European states will be unavoidable.

Leiner demanded that the standards of healthcare achieved not be eradicated despite the financial problems with government budgets and the declining revenues of statutory health insurers due to the considerably higher degree of unemployment: “That would be an attack on the health of the population and in the long run economically unreasonable. In the medium term a worsening of public health services leads to more sick leave, health-related early retirements and poorer performance at work, and is consequently a strain on the economy. Thus excellent public health services for everyone are not only ethically indispensable, but also an investment in the economic location.”

Yet Leiner has not closed his mind to the demand for cost-cutting measures in the public health sector. “In view of the current economic situation, there must be an end to the continuing opposition to long-overdue reforms, cost-cuts and increases in efficiency. Only those who rationalise the health care system will be able to prevent the rationing of health care services.”

The ramifications of the crisis on the health situation clearly extend beyond the financial problems of the statutory health insurance schemes. Experts warn that in the scope of the economic crisis behaviours that are harmful to health will be on the rise again. The number of smokers threatens to climb as much as the increase in alcohol abuse and a trend toward unhealthier nutrition is also feared. The difficult economic situation in many households and unemployment can also lead to a rise in stress-related illnesses and depression. For this reason increased preventive and informational measures are now particularly important.



### **“Protection for the most vulnerable”**

“The economic crisis presents many challenges to health and increases the need for European and international cooperation”, said Robert Madelin, Director-General for Health and Consumers. “We need to: invest in health, focus more on prevention, and on the promotion of healthy lifestyles, create more dynamic and sustainable health systems. And do all we can to reduce inequalities in health and maintain our commitment to the fundamental values of solidarity, respect for human rights and protection of the most vulnerable.”

The poor and the most vulnerable are likely to suffer most in crises. “Evidence shows that 16 percent of the population in the European Union is already at risk of poverty”, said Nata Menabde, Deputy Regional Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe. Difficult choices are being and will have to be made in terms of spending and priorities, but it is vitally important that, despite the current problems, the Region and Member States remain committed to the values and principles agreed in the 2008 Tallinn Charter: promoting shared values of solidarity, equity and participation through health policies, resource allocation and other actions, ensuring due attention is paid to the needs of the poor and other vulnerable groups. Ideally the health system can and should do three things: firstly protect those most in need, secondly concentrate on areas in which it is effective and adds value, and thirdly behave as an intelligent economic actor in terms of investment, expenditure and employment.

#### **Press Contact:**

#### **EHFG Press Office**

c/o MB Dialog

Thomas Brey

Tel.: +43 1 917 51 18-15

Mob.: +43 676 542 39 09

E-Mail: [ehfg@mbdialog.at](mailto:ehfg@mbdialog.at)