



Press Release: 13th European Health Forum Gastein, 6 – 9 October 2010

Experts call for stronger leadership in Europe for global health

Globalization is also posing a host of challenges to healthcare systems. Unequal distribution of health resources, the rapid spread of pathogens, global patient tourism, and a medical brain drain are among the major ones. Experts at the European Health Forum Gastein called on Europe to exercise stronger leadership in global health.

Bad Hofgastein, 7 October 2010 – Health is increasingly becoming a critical component of economic development, security, trade and foreign policy. It is also one of the largest global industries and encompasses major trans-border movements of goods, people and services. Global developments have an impact on European health policies and relate to wider European interests and responsibilities, experts pointed out today at the European Health Forum Gastein.

The EHFG is the most important conference on healthcare policy in the EU. This year it has attracted about 600 decision-makers from more than 40 countries in the fields of healthcare policy, research, science, and business as well as from patients' organizations.

“Globalization is changing healthcare policy permanently. That is why we too have to become increasingly global in the way we plan European healthcare policy,” said Professor Dr. Ilona Kickbusch, Director of the Global Health Program at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, and Chair of the Global Health Europe Task Force. “With the increase in mobility, health problems and diseases worldwide have become more similar. The spread of infectious diseases is a good example.” Global Health Europe presented a strategy paper at the EHFG on the subject: “Impact of global processes on health systems in Europe.” It addresses the interdependence of Europe's own national health systems as well as its wider responsibility for global health.

“Distinctions made between domestic and international health problems are less and less useful in a global forum,” said the author of the study, Dr. Göran Tomson, Professor of International Health System Research, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm: “Inherent to globalization is the phenomenon of cross-border flows. In healthcare, this includes the cross-border movement of people as well as the cross-border movement of pharmaceuticals, technology and health-related information.”

Health tourism with serious consequences

One phenomenon of globalization in the health sector is the increased mobility of patients. In Europe, crossing borders for medical treatments has long been a widespread practice. Techniker Kasse, a health insurance organization for engineers in Germany, recently estimated that 40 percent of its members have opted at least once for treatment abroad in another EU country. Yet the flows of patients set in motion by a search for less expensive medical services have long extended beyond the borders of the EU. Brazil and Southeast Asia are both well-established destinations for Europeans interested in cosmetic surgery, for example. “Social recognition and the exchange of ideas about treatments available elsewhere have combined with Europe's established low-cost travel market”, Prof. Tomson explained the increased mobility of patients. Antibiotic resistance is one outcome of medical tourism that should be high on the list of priorities in European countries.”

Shortage of healthcare personnel

Professor Kickbusch noted that increased mobility by members of the healthcare professions has also created new problems on an international scale. The mobility of physicians can have a lasting effect on health systems in individual countries. “There are consequences if a large number of physicians in a certain country emigrate abroad because of the better conditions there for working and conducting research.” Within Europe,

the new EU member states are most affected by this medical brain drain. Professor Tomson: “Some European countries, most notably transition countries from Eastern Europe, lose native doctors to wealthier countries in Western Europe. Romania is one such example with one in ten doctors migrating to Western Europe.”

Europe also draws important expertise from developing countries. Only three percent of the world’s medical personnel is currently working in Sub-Saharan Africa. This situation is exacerbated by the migration of well-trained healthcare professionals from that region.

Calling for a strong European healthcare policy

Today, experts at the EHFG called on Europe to exercise leadership in the global healthcare arena. Professor Tomson: “Interdependence and responsibility are influenced by certain factors so there is a clear need for European national policy-makers to consider global processes when they design national healthcare systems. There is a need to develop not only national policies, but policies that are truly global.”

For that to happen, the EU must move in the direction of a single European health policy. Professor Kickbusch: “We have to strength healthcare policy at the EU level of authority. The isolated development of separate national strategies is not productive,” Professor Kickbusch emphasized.

Forum5: Health is global: Is Europe ready?, Hosted by Global Health Europe. Thursday, 7 October 2010

EHFG Press Office:

B&K Medien- und Kommunikationsberatung

Dr. Birgit Kofler

Phone during the conference: +43 6432 3393 239

Mobile: +43 676 636 89 30

Phone: Vienna Office: +43 1 319 43 78

E-mail: kofler@bkkommunikation.com