



EHFG 2011: Lifestyle Diseases as a Central Topic

Non-communicable diseases account for 86 percent of all deaths in Europe. EHFG President Professor Leiner: Consistent prevention can save millions of lives.

The fourteenth European Health Forum Gastein is being held in Bad Hofgastein in the Austrian province of Salzburg from 5 through 8 October 2011. The focus will be on non-communicable diseases. Typical longevity diseases such as cardio-vascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes or cancer will top the agenda. They are the cause of 86 percent of all deaths in Europe. EHFG President Professor Leiner called on healthcare policymakers to step up prevention efforts. Five and a half million human lives could be saved worldwide over the next ten years with consistent efforts in tobacco policy alone.

Vienna/Bad Hofgastein, 4 July 2011 – Non-communicable diseases are a central threat to humans nowadays and a burden for healthcare systems. Cardio-vascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and cancer account for 77 percent of the diseases burdening the 53 countries of the WHO Region Europe and are the cause of 86 percent of all deaths,” EHFG President Professor Dr. Günther Leiner said on Monday evening at his presentation of the main agenda points for this year’s EHFG Congress.

It is not only the rich countries where this group of lifestyle diseases is gaining enormously in importance. The emerging markets and developing countries are witnessing this same trend. These disorders are responsible for 63 percent of the 57 million deaths occurring worldwide each year according to the Global Status Report issued by the WHO.

Professor Leiner: “This trend is especially irritating because most of these diseases are associated with known risk factors such as lack of exercise, unhealthy diet, alcohol abuse and smoking, all of which could be avoided. Six million people around the world die each year from the consequences of tobacco consumption. Despite all we know about the deadliness of smoking, the incidence of smoking worldwide will continue to rise to an estimated 7.5 million deaths from cigarettes in the year 2020. The WHO estimates that 3.2 million people die every year from a lack of exercise, 2.8 million from the consequences of obesity and 2.5 million because of alcohol abuse. But we are currently spending 97 percent of all health outlays on treatment while investing a meager three percent in prevention. This is a massive challenge for health policymakers.”

Concrete steps could save millions of human lives

“That is particularly important because several concrete actions across Europe and the world could save millions of human lives. Above all, policy decisions have to be made to reduce smoking massively and permanently,” Professor Leiner said. A group of scientists recently presented figures in *The Lancet* indicating that 5.5 million premature deaths could be avoided over ten years if the international Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) were implemented more quickly than the target date of 2040. The goal of the convention is to

reduce smokers to just five percent of the population. Professor Leiner: “Intentional heavy taxation of tobacco products could be a big help in moving things in that direction.” Other important actions targeted at international level are to reduce daily salt intake by an average of three grams to curb the frequency of strokes and heart attacks, to eliminate trans fats and to cut down on saturated fatty acids or to implement transport and traffic policies that efficiently promote exercise.

Fixed item in European health policy

The European Health Forum Gastein is the leading health policy conference in Europe. Each year, it attracts more than 600 politicians, decision-makers, representatives of special interest groups and experts from policy-making and administration, business and industry, civil society, and science and research from some 40 countries. They gather the first week of October in the Gastein Valley in the Austrian province of Salzburg to consult on current trends in European health policy. Professor Leiner: “Many topics initiated at the EHFG over its 14-year history became part of the general discourse and were concretely implemented in political terms. One example is rare diseases, also referred to as orphan diseases.” The 14th European Health Forum Gastein will be held in Bad Hofgastein from 5 through 8 October 2011. This year's motto is "Europe's Health in 2020 and beyond" (see the conference program at www.ehfg.org).

As in years past, the EHFG expects to welcome about 20 government ministers and undersecretaries from around the world. The key speakers who have already committed for this year's plenary sessions include the following individuals:

- Austrian Federal Minister Alois Stöger (Health)
- EU Commissioner John Dalli (Health and Consumer Policy)
- EU Commissioner Maire Geoghegan-Quinn (Research, Innovation and Science)
- Minister Ewa Kopacz (Health) from Poland, the country that has the EU Presidency in the second half of 2011
- Minister Bertel Haarder (Interior and Health) from Denmark, the country set to have the EU Presidency in the first half of 2012
- WHO Europe Director Zsuzsanna Jakab

There is one specifically Austrian innovation at this year's EHFG Congress. For the first time, the regional health ministers from the nine Austrian provinces will gather at the EHFG on 4 and 5 October in Bad Hofgastein for their meeting.

More health expertise for the EU

Professor Leiner: “I look forward to this cross-linking of regional and European health policy and a lively exchange between these levels. In the medium to long term, all of us in Europe will have to face this issue. From the standpoint of affordability and quality, highly decentralized decision-making structures will not be adequate for meeting the big challenges of health systems in the future. I also mean this with regard to EU competencies. As transnational cooperation is successively increased, the EU should be given much expanded powers in dealing with healthcare issues. A lack of common EU health policy is not in keeping with currently requirements.”

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