



Gastein health forum: Health for all

Written by **Pamela Rendi-Wagner** on 28 September 2017 in **Opinion**

The European Health Forum Gastein will be a chance for Austria to present some of its priorities for its upcoming EU Council presidency, explains Pamela Rendi-Wagner.



Pamela Rendi-Wagner | *Photo credit: Austrian Federal Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs*

At the European Health Forum Gastein, about 500 to 600 leading representatives from institutions of the political, scientific, economic and administrative sectors, as well as international organisations and various interest groups will be present. This heterogeneity somehow reflects the complex landscape of the European healthcare systems, with their different actors and interests.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the European Health Forum Gastein, one of the WHO's main concepts, 'Health in all politics - a better future for Europe', has been adopted as the general theme.

The Austrian Federal Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs will present some of its priorities for our upcoming EU Council presidency, which will start in the second half of 2018. We are looking forward to the opportunity to enrich the ongoing preparations through joint discussions and to hearing the expertise of the participants.

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According to the EU working procedures, Austria will be responsible for moving forward dossiers and issues already on the agenda and some important legal matters are expected to be finalised. This website uses cookies to store information on your computer, and browsing the site indicates your acceptance of this. [View our cookie policy \(http://dods.co.uk/cookies.php\)](http://dods.co.uk/cookies.php)

The EU Council presidency also offers member states - including the smaller countries - the chance to highlight specific matters of high priority. I understand ()

In the health sector, particular emphasis will be placed on the food value chain - transforming food systems and adding value for better health in Europe - and ensuring access to pharmaceuticals - sending the right signals to the market and to policymakers.

Food systems are a critical determinant of health. The European food system experienced dramatic changes during the last century.

After the Second World War, ensuring access to appropriate energy intake and fighting undernutrition was a priority for European nutrition and agriculture policies. Successful policies resulted in increased production, availability and affordability of low-cost, energy dense, high in fat, trans-fats and sugar processed foods.

The past few decades have also been characterised by an alarming rise of overweight, obesity and non-communicable disease (NCD) prevalence rates. High prevalence rates are associated with a negative impact on citizens' health, quality of life and life expectancy, but also with reduced labour force and increased health care expenditures in member states and the EU.

The Austrian Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs will hold a session at the European Health Forum Gastein on the food value chain and the nutrition system. During this session, interrelations between the single production steps from the agricultural production to the consumable end-product and current phenomena such as overweight, obesity and the rise of non-communicable diseases will be contextualised.

High level panellists are due to participate, and I expect a very active and constructive discussion with the audience. In the spirit of the 'Health in all politics' approach, the different production stages, as well as their influence on the health of the population, will be made transparent.

Studies on the tasks of regulating and governing bodies, both at national and European Union level (for example, within the European Commission), have shown that in this area, a number of services are concerned with food production issues.

At national level, even institutions which partly operate with diametrically opposed intentions share these same concerns. We must rethink our approach - including at the political level - on how to secure a healthy diet in relation to food production along the entire value chain.

The overarching aim is to contribute to a sustainable food system with a affordable, accessible and available food that can accommodate the aims of the different sectors involved including health, agriculture, environment and trade.

To this end, the Austrian EU Council presidency will aim to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between different government departments which have a stake in sustainable food systems. We will also look to identify the co-benefits of health for other sectors and present policy options to harness these benefits.

The presidency will also seek to pinpoint market and governance failures and unwanted trade-offs and deficiencies. We also hope to improve policy coherence across departments and levels towards an integrated food policy.

And, we plan to identify potential entry points into the regulatory frameworks to facilitate the development of a sustainable, equitable and health promoting food system within an effective, functioning internal market.

Other than food, another key priority for the Ministry of Health and Woman's Affairs during Austria's EU Council presidency will be to focus on sustainable access to innovative medicines. Access to medicines is a fundamental pillar of universal healthcare, and it is crucial for fulfilling the human right to the highest attainable level of health.

In recent years, policymakers have faced increasingly complex challenges when it comes to ensuring access to the best available pharmaceutical therapies for their respective populations, within the public budgetary constraints.

Additionally, the public sector has often failed to send the right signals to the pharmaceutical sector in terms of stimulating and rewarding the development of innovative medicines that meet therapeutic needs.

Strengthening cooperation between member states in the field of pharmaceuticals will be important to address these challenges effectively.

The ultimate goal in the healthcare sector should be to provide patients with the best therapies and services available.

To attain this, all stakeholders in the healthcare sector should be involved in a joint effort and in a continuous dialogue.

About the author

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