



The EU's health policy: fit for purpose

Europeans are living longer and healthier lives. However, certain current and future health-related challenges – from combating diseases to promoting healthy living – require robust and coordinated EU policies.



Facts and figures

Healthcare in Europe is constantly improving and evolving, while advances in medical technology and techniques are unlocking the mystery of previously untreatable conditions and helping us face up to new and emerging health challenges.

This is illustrated by the fact that Europeans today enjoy a longer and healthier life than previous generations. According to Eurostat, life expectancy of a boy at birth is currently 75.8 years, while the life expectancy of a newborn girl is 82 years³. In addition, Europeans can expect to live an increasing proportion of their lives free of serious disease or disability, as measured by 'healthy life years'⁴.

Given that Europeans are generally living longer and healthier lives, it is unsurprising that some 70% of EU citizens believe that their national healthcare system is of high quality, according to Eurobarometer⁵. This is especially the case in Belgium (97%), Austria (95%) and Finland (91%). The survey also revealed that the most important quality criteria for EU citizens are well-trained medical staff (52%) and the clinical effectiveness of treatment (39%).

► Healthy living for all

In spite of a generally high level of healthcare in Europe and the European model of solidarity and social security, there exists something of a health gap both within individual countries and comparatively between the different Member States. In fact, a social gradient in health status exists where people with less education, a lower occupational class or lower income tend to die at a younger age and to have a higher prevalence of certain types of health problems.

This is reflected in the difference in life expectancy at birth between the lowest and highest socio-economic groups, which is ten years for men and six for women. There is also a gap across the EU, as illustrated by the fact that women in the highest-scoring countries can expect to live eight years longer than in the lowest scoring, while the difference for men is 14 years. Moreover, although women generally live longer than men, they are more likely to spend a longer proportion of their lives suffering from ill health.

In recent years, the EU has been working with Member States to help narrow the health gap. Through the open method of coordination on social protection and social inclusion²¹, EU Member States have committed themselves to reducing inequalities in access to healthcare and health outcomes. Reducing health inequalities is also a key focus of the Commission's 'Together for health' strategy.

In October 2009, the Commission launched its 'Solidarity in health' initiative²² which identifies action for improving knowledge on this issue, better monitoring and data collection, and more assessment of how EU policies can tackle health inequalities in collaboration with countries, regions and stakeholders.



► Policy milestones

- 1986: Single European Act introduces a specific article on public health
- 2002: Launch of First Programme of Community Action in the Field of Health¹²
- 2007: Commission launches its 'Together for health' strategy (2008-2013)
- 2008: Second Programme of Community Action in the Field of Health (2008-2013)¹³

► Future challenges:

- Cementing and deepening health co-operation between Member States in light of the Lisbon Treaty
- Dealing with the health-related challenges posed by Europe's greying population

Health challenges facing Europe

Nevertheless, the EU faces a number of significant health challenges. Millions of Europeans suffer from cardiovascular diseases⁶ and cancer⁷, which are also the two diseases which claim the most lives, while HIV/AIDS⁸ remains of major concern in Europe and globally. Even though it is about as common as the cold, influenza⁹ is of enormous concern because of its contagious nature and the fact that new and potentially deadly strains emerge periodically, such as 'swine flu'. The increasingly sedentary lifestyles led by many Europeans, coupled with poor diets, have also turned obesity¹⁰ into a growing public health problem.

Dealing with all these complex and interrelated issues requires a broad range of responses, including research into new treatments and drugs, preventive care, lifestyle and dietary changes, and more.

Grey matters

Another challenge to be faced relates to the ageing of the European population. The EU estimates that, if current trends continue, the percentage of people over 65 is set to grow from 17% to 30% over the next five decades¹¹. By that time, there will be approximately one European of retirement age for every two Europeans active in the labour force.

This greying of the EU's population carries certain health-related implications. Older people require healthcare more often as well as different types of care, and so health systems will have to evolve to meet these needs. In addition, there is the question of how, with a growing inactive population, Europe will continue to be able to pay for quality healthcare systems, not to mention the growing demand for residential care arrangements.

Many of these health-related challenges do not stop at national borders and require the pooling of resources in order to deal with them.

EU policy

In Europe, health policies are mostly formulated and action taken at the national level. However, given the many common challenges and issues facing public health systems across the European Union, the EU plays a complementary role to national efforts and helps Member States to co-operate with one another and coordinate their actions. Areas of particular focus include protecting people from cross-border health threats and diseases, promoting healthy lifestyles and patient mobility, as well as reducing health inequalities.

► Saving lives: cross-border organ donation

Organ transplants save thousands of lives each year. They are the most effective treatment for end-stage kidney failure and the only treatment for end-stage heart, lung and liver failure. However, despite the life-saving potential of transplants, there is an acute shortage of donor organs and/or local matches may be hard to find. As a result, more than 50 000 people in the EU are on waiting lists for organ transplants. Of these, a dozen or so die each day.

To address this situation, the European Commission has proposed an EU Directive²³ on organ donation and transplantation. There are currently divergent national quality and safety criteria which means that minimum common standards for the organs that are exchanged between EU countries each year cannot be ensured.

This Directive seeks to tackle three key challenges: improving the quality and safety of organs across Europe, increasing the availability of organs, and making transplant systems more efficient and accessible. The draft Regulation will ensure that there is a competent monitoring authority in each Member State, will establish a common system for the procurement and transplantation of organs, will put in place traceability mechanisms, and will ensure that all relevant information is available to transplant teams.

The Directive is accompanied by a ten-point action plan for implementation by Member States²⁴, covering 2009 to 2015, which centres on three areas of activity: increasing the availability of organs; enhancing the efficiency and accessibility of transplantation systems; and improving quality and safety.



► Knowledge is the best medicine

Given that knowledge and technology help us unlock the secrets of good health, build defences against illness and find treatments for diseases, it is hardly surprising that the EU invests heavily in health-related research. EU-funded research is meant to complement national research, address common European challenges, pool resources, create synergies, and promote cross-border collaboration.

The current Seventh Framework Programme for Research²⁵ (FP7, 2007-2013) has earmarked over €6 billion for health-related research and development²⁶. FP7 seeks both to improve the health of European citizens and to boost the competitiveness of health-related industries and businesses, while addressing global health issues.

FP7 funds R&D activities in a number of health-related areas, including infectious diseases, public health, genomics and systems biology, health biotechnology, and innovative medical initiatives. Other areas of EU-backed research that have a link to health include food science and technology, agriculture and fisheries²⁷, as well as the environment²⁸.

The so-called Single European Act (which revised the 1957 Treaty of Rome that established what has evolved into the EU) introduced a specific article on public health¹⁴. The Lisbon Treaty¹⁵ – which is now in force and provides the Union with a streamlined and more efficient legal framework in order to meet future challenges and citizens' demands – also contains references to public health under its provisions to improve the lives of Europeans.

For the 2008 to 2013 period, the European Commission's health-related activities are guided by the 'Together for health' strategy¹⁶. This strategy has three key objectives: fostering good health in an ageing Europe, protecting citizens from health threats, and supporting dynamic health systems and new technologies.

It also sets out a number of fundamental principles for joint EU action:

- **Shared values:** including promoting patients' rights, equal access to healthcare, and an evidence-based approach to health policy.

► Did you know that ...?

- Life expectancy at birth is now 82 years for girls and 75.8 years for boys.
- Some 70% of Europeans believe their healthcare system is good.
- People over 65 will make up 30% of the EU's population by 2060.
- Cardiovascular diseases, which kill about 2 million Europeans annually, are the largest cause of death in the EU. They cost European health systems an estimated €110 billion per year.
- Healthcare expenditure ranges from 11% of GDP in France to 4.7% in Romania¹, and more than €4 000 per person in Denmark to €300 per person in Romania².

- **Healthy is wealthy and wise:** good health is an essential component of Europeans' quality of life. It is also a crucial prerequisite for economic prosperity and growth.
- **Healthy policy:** many other policy areas also have an impact on public health. These include environmental, research, consumer and regional policies – all of which have to take into account health-related issues.
- **Healthy planet:** numerous health challenges are global in nature so the EU needs to be part of international efforts to tackle them. In addition, as a good global citizen, the EU should work to improve human health everywhere. This requires the Union to consolidate its position within international organisations and strengthen co-operation with its partners.

Certain Member States enjoy a comparative advantage in particular areas of healthcare provision or may even have excess capacity in their systems. In this context, the EU can better respond to the health needs of citizens and make the most of health systems by promoting patient mobility. Following a public consultation, in 2004 the European Commission outlined a number of recommendations relating to patient mobility¹⁷.

In 2008, the Commission proposed an EU Directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare¹⁸. Following a period of deadlock, EU health ministers approved the Directive¹⁹ in June 2010. The new legislation entitles Europeans who fulfil certain criteria to seek treatment in any Member State and apply for reimbursement in their home country²⁰.





Further information

- Health-EU portal²⁹
- EU-funded health projects³⁰
- EU health statistics³¹
- EU health indicators³²
- Fact sheet on the health impact of environmental quality³³
- Work and health in the EU – a statistical portrait³⁴

Communicator's toolkit

- Europe in action: for healthier, safer, more confident citizens³⁵
- Health-related publications³⁶
- HELP campaign: Q&A³⁷ and website³⁸
- EU Health Prize for Journalists³⁹
- Health-related videos⁴⁰
- Public health videos⁴¹
- Health-EU e-newsletter⁴²
- The EU Youth Health Initiative⁴³
- Video on EU Health Insurance Card⁴⁴
- Video on importance of healthy workplaces⁴⁵
- Video on healthcare without border⁴⁶

¹ <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do?dvsc=4>

² <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do?dvsc=4>

³ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Life_expectancy_statistics

⁴ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Healthy_life_years_statistics

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_327_en.pdf

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/cardiovascular_diseases/index_en.htm

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/cancer/index_en.htm

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/hiv-aids/index_en.htm

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/avian_influenza/index_en.htm

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/other_non-communicable_diseases/index_en.htm

¹¹ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Population_projections

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_programme/programme_en.htm

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_programme/pgm2008_2013_en.htm

¹⁴ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/institutional_affairs/treaties/amsterdam_treaty/a16000_en.htm

¹⁵ http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/index_en.htm

¹⁶ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2007&nu_doc=630

¹⁷ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2004/com2004_0301en01.pdf

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_overview/co_operation/healthcare/docs/COM_en.pdf

¹⁹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/114992.pdf

²⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=559&langId=en>

²¹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/common_objectives_en.htm

²² http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/socio_economics/documents/com2009_en.pdf

²³ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_threats/human_substance/oc_organes/docs/organs_directive_en.pdf

²⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_threats/human_substance/oc_organes/docs/organs_action_en.pdf

²⁵ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html

²⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/research/health/index_en.html

²⁷ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/kbbe/home_en.html

²⁸ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/environment/home_en.html

²⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/index_en.htm

³⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/health/projects/index_en.htm

³¹ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_in_the_eu/statistics/index_en.htm

³² http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_in_the_eu/ec_health_indicators/index_en.htm

³³ http://ec.europa.eu/health/healthy_environments/docs/env_en.pdf

³⁴ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-57-04-807/EN/KS-57-04-807-EN.PDF

³⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/sanco_e_mag/index_en.htm

³⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/health/publications/index_en.htm

³⁷ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/10/219&format=HTML&aged=0&language=en&guiLanguage=en>

³⁸ <http://www.help-eu.com/>

³⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/journalist_prize/2010/index_en.htm

⁴⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/videos/index_en.htm

⁴¹ <http://www.healthclips.eu/>

⁴² http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/newsletter_en.htm

⁴³ http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/youth/index_en.htm

⁴⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3-nLRW4swk

⁴⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK2HzW8Y6E>

⁴⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amRzRnuX7fo>