## European Health Forum Gastein 2013: “Shock-proofing” Europe's health system

16th European Health Forum Gastein, 2 – 4 October 2013

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*European Health Forum Gastein prepares for its 16th Congress: “Resilient and Innovative Health Systems in Europe”*

**Bad Hofgastein/Brussels, 29 May 2013** -- Speaking at an EHFG 2013 pre-event in the European Parliament today, EHFG President Helmut Brand said European health systems were in urgent need of “shock-proofing” if they were to meet the challenges posed by severe pressure on budgets.

The 16th EHFG conference, entitled “Resilient and Innovative Health Systems”, will take place at Bad Hofgastein, Austria, from 2 to 4 October 2013.

Maastricht University health expert Prof Brand, who took over the presidency of the leading health policy conference at the end of last year, said the focus this year would be on how to safeguard innovation, both technical and social. “Innovation is crucial to European health policy,” he said. “People derive more direct benefit from innovation in healthcare than in any other area. But austerity policies are having an especially harsh impact in many countries. Making cuts and innovation do not really fit together. So where is the line? At what point do cuts become critical for health systems and endanger social safety nets?”

**Political impact**

How to “shock-proof” Europe's health systems will be the central theme for this year's EHFG Meeting in the Austrian Alps, it provides a unique forum for NGOs, patients organisations, academics, healthcare providers and industry to discuss burning issues face-to-face with policy- and decision-makers. For its part, the European Commission has the opportunity of presenting its health strategies for discussion in a uniquely open atmosphere.

Prof Brand hopes that future EHFG conferences will also include representatives of the next three EU presidencies. “This should ensure that issues which come up in Gastein directly affect actual, concrete policy,” said Prof Brand. “Following the Treaty of Maastricht, health is an EU policy area, and political decisions in social and health policies affect the lives of individual people very directly.”

**Europe has no health borders**

Always looking beyond Europe's borders, the EHFG will also hear contributions from and about emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – the so-called BRICS nations – which have an increasing role in global health. “But the EHFG has also for many years concerned itself with health policy in neighbouring regions such as south-eastern Europe,” said Prof Brand.

One very topical development, the planned Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) between the USA and the EU would also be the subject of detailed debate, Prof Brand said. “It would have a major impact on the health sector in many fields.”

**Gastein - both monitor and seismograph**

Thanks to the experts and decision-makers it attracts, the EHFG has for years acted as a kind of seismograph. “The one constant in health is change, and that is what most preoccupies us,” said Prof Brand. Past EHFG conferences notably identified at an early stage the demographic changes and their consequences, and the global spread of non-communicable diseases - previously assumed only to be a problem for rich countries, but swiftly becoming a global issue.

**Socially equitable access to health, and prevention**

EHFG Vice-President Karin Kadenbach, a European Socialist Party MEP who sits on the EP's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee, also spoke at the event, emphasising her commitment to socially equitable, affordable, access to health services, and to encouraging a healthy lifestyle. “Those that take active responsibility for their own health are not just ensuring their own well-being,” she said. “They are also helping to make sure health systems remain affordable in the future.”

**Patients' participation**

Nicola Bedlington of the European Patients' Forum said: “We see the European Health Forum Gastein as a key opportunity to step back and reflect with other stakeholders on some of the fundamental challenges facing citizens and patients in Europe. We have had the opportunity to address central policy topics for us –such as health inequalities and health literacy with lasting impact. We look forward to more of this in the future.”

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