## EHFG 2013: NEW CONSENSUS PAPER CALLS FOR EU ACTION ON HEALTH LITERACY

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*A new consensus paper on how to advance health literacy in Europe was launched today at the European Health Forum Gastein. A broad policy coalition recommends that the EU Commission should prioritise on a number of actions in the field of health literacy. Well-informed people who take responsibility for their own health are less likely to develop chronic diseases, feel healthier and live longer. However there are major gaps in health literacy in Europe.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 4 October 2013** – “Health literacy is a cross-cutting issue that can play a key role in EU health policy goals to support the Europe 2020 vision of ‘smart, inclusive and sustainable growth’. Investment in health literacy is essential to improve health systems performance and support empowerment of citizens across the spectrum of health promotion, disease prevention and healthcare,” Dr Kristine Sorensen (Maastricht University) said at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

“Resilient and Innovative Health Systems for Europe” is the slogan for this year's EHFG. More than 550 participants from some 45 countries are attending Europe's most important health policy conference in Bad Hofgastein to exchange views on key issues affecting European health systems.

During the EHFG, a new consensus paper was launched on how to advance health literacy in Europe. The document was developed by a broad policy coalition consisting of European Patient’s Forum (EPF), Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), MSD and Maastricht University/HLS-EU. The signatories of the consensus paper “Actions for the European Commission to advance health literacy” recommend that the European Commission should prioritise on a number of actions in this field (see info box).

People with higher health literacy are less likely to develop chronic diseases, demonstrate healthier behaviours, are more adherent to treatment and live longer. At the same time, high or low health literacy levels also have impacts on the efficiency of health systems. “It has been estimated that the costs of low health literacy may account for 3 to 5% of total healthcare costs at health system level," Dr Sorensen said.

However, there are major gaps in health literacy in Europe. That was revealed by the European Health Literacy Project (HLS-EU) which won last year’s prestige European Health Award. According to the study, 47% of the population on average in eight European countries are estimated to have insufficient or problematic levels of health literacy. There are marked differences in levels of health literacy between countries, but also within states. Certain sub-groups within populations are at greater risk, such as the elderly, people with low levels of education or socio-economic status, as well as those who report suffering bad health. Limited health literacy has wide-ranging consequences: People with poor health literacy are hospitalised more often, are more likely to receive inappropriate treatment or prescriptions, and are less inclined to take preventative measures.

*Info box:*The signatories of the consensus paper “Actions for the European Commission to advance health literacy” recommend that the European Commission should prioritise on the following actions:

1. Support a comprehensive mapping exercise to gain an overview of the state-of-the-art, existing initiatives, promising interventions and potential for replication, and scale-up, as well as gaps in the evidence base that will need to be addressed. (Call for proposals or tender under the next Commission work programme).
2. Develop a Commission Communication on health literacy that establishes a consensus of the concept, terminology and definition in all EU languages based on the recent research; emphasizes the importance of health literacy for patients’ safety, quality of care, health systems performance, prevention of functional decline, non-discrimination in the health sector and the development of citizen’s health competencies; and explores possible future policy options.
3. Roll out the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU) by conducting Eurobarometer surveys including all 28 Member States as a means to ensure long-term monitoring of health literacy developments in the EU;
4. Support specific research projects on health literacy, based on the mapping exercise, to address gaps in evidence base – see table 1.
5. Establish a collaboration among DGs (SANCO, EMPL, EAC, CONNECT, EDUCATION etc.) on the EU health literacy strategy, based on the principle of “Health in All Policies”.
6. Support the integration of health literacy as part of capacity-building of health professionals within the EU Health Workforce Action Plan.
7. Foster and promote collaboration and knowledge-exchange across world regions, e.g. with the Western Hemisphere and Asia (e.g. a similar initiative as the HLS-EU study is now undertaken in Asia as HLS-Asia, learn from the National Action Plan of the United States).
8. Promote health literacy through means of e-health, internet and social media including focus on quality control and data protection.

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