## EU PRESIDENCY TRIO OPENS EUROPEAN HEALTH FORUM GASTEIN: “HEALTH IS NOT JUST ABOUT COSTS, IT'S ABOUT INVESTING IN GROWTH”

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*The idea that health is just about expenditures is a relict of the last century, Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, Minister of Health of Lithuania said when he spoke today at the opening of the European Health Forum Gastein. Greek Health Minister Spyridon-Adonis Georgiades underlined that “we are not simply undergoing a crisis. This is the new reality.”*

**Bad Hofgastein, 2 October 2013** - “The idea that health is just about expenditures – even if it is shared by some in Brussels and by certain national ministries of finance – has to be considered as a relict of the twentieth century”, said Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, Lithuania's Minister of Health speaking today at the European Health Forum Gastein. “We should instead focus health as an investment. Growth of the health sector enriches the economy in large. A healthy workforce ensures productivity; increase in life expectancy, if correlated with a higher retirement age, helps to ensure social insurance funds are sustainable; and innovation in medicine ensures the competitiveness of European pharmaceutical and engineering companies and boosts science and technological progress in all sectors.”

„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. The EHFG is exploring the fraught relationship between austerity policy and necessary innovations in healthcare systems, and is debating what can be learnt from the current crisis and how systems can react in a resilient and innovative way.

Today’s EHFG opening session featured representatives of the trio of Presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Lithuania, which currently has the Presidency, was represented by Minister Andriukaitis, while Greece, which is the next country to hold the Presidency, was represented by its Minister of Health Spyridon-Adonis Georgiades. Ireland, which held the EU Presidency in the first six months of 2013, was represented by the Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of Health Fergal Lynch.

“We are not simply undergoing a crisis. This is the new reality and we have to face it,” Greek Health Minister Spyridon-Adonis Georgiades said at the EHFG. Most EU Member States, in response to the challenging economic climate, have taken policy measures or are in the process of putting forward reforms aiming at increasing efficiency and curb expenditures in health care in the context of broader austerity measures, Minister Georgiades said. “The challenge is how to give better value for money and increase cost-effectiveness. Finding solutions to these challenges is what we are looking for,” he added. “In ancient Greece, Alexander the Great cut the Gordian Knot with his sword. However, things are much more difficult today in relation to the sustainability of health systems.”

“Building innovative and resilient healthcare systems and meeting the growing demand for healthcare with limited resources represent key challenges facing Member States today. We need to pursue reforms in health care, address costs and protect patients”, said Fergal Lynch, Deputy Secretary General of the Irish Department of Health. He underlined the importance of this year’s EHFG topic. “Action at the EU level will help us be resilient and innovative in this regard”, Mr. Lynch said.

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## PROBLEMATIC ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DAMAGING EUROPE’S ECONOMIES

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*Problematic alcohol use is responsible for annual productivity losses of 74 billion euros across the EU, according to experts at the European Health Forum Gastein. Flexible, cost-effective screening and brief intervention (SBI) measures that are easy to implement in workplaces can help to identify and treat alcohol-related illness.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 2 October 2013** – “Problematic alcohol use does not only cause serious damage to personal health – it also has a debilitating effect on Europe’s economy. A significant mental health problem, problematic alcohol consumption is responsible for productivity losses of around 74 billion euros annually within the European Union. Sick leave and absenteeism resulting from harmful alcohol consumption have become an enormous burden on the economy,” said Don Shenker, Director of the UK-based Alcohol Health Network, today at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). Mental health as a fundamental component of a healthy economy and a driver of growth is one of the main points on the agenda at this year’s EHFG.

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**Up to 25 % of employees in large companies affected**

Figures from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) show just how widespread alcohol-related problems are in working life, and demonstrate their impact on productivity in European businesses. According to the ILO problematic alcohol use affects the health of up to 25 % of staff in major companies. However, strategies aimed at resolving such mental health problems often run into significant obstacles – such as a lack of awareness of the problem among employees, managers and society, or the trivialisation and deliberate concealment of alcohol consumption for fear of the professional consequences, including dismissal and a loss of social standing. “The frameworks and instruments needed to recognise alcohol problems at an early stage are frequently lacking,” noted Shenker.

But there is no shortage of effective, easily accessible and cost-effective means of pinpointing alcohol-related problems and their prevalence in the workplace. “These include the AUDIT self-assessment questionnaire, a more flexible and standardised international screening test that quickly provides the basis for the targeted application of brief interventions, but which is still underused,” Shenker added.
Numerous studies have underlined the effectiveness of standardised SBI measures in highlighting problematic alcohol use. Research carried out in the US has shown that every dollar invested in screening and brief intervention structures for alcohol problems generates a saving of four dollars for companies thanks to a reduction in alcohol-related absenteeism and sick leave.

In Europe over seven percent of all illnesses and premature deaths are attributed to problematic alcohol use, while almost half of the economic costs resulting from alcohol problems are the result of productivity losses in the workplace. “This clearly shows that workplace screening and brief intervention programmes will play a key role in resolving this problem,” said Don Shenker. He then went on to call on politicians to make preventing alcohol problems in the workplace a higher priority: “Neither EU nor national strategies aimed at reducing alcohol-related problems contain clear recommendations for SBI programmes in the workplace, this needs to be embedded in a new EU strategy on alcohol”, he commented.

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