Health systems in crisis – countering shockwaves and fatigue

Health systems in Europe were facing significant problems pre-COVID, from underfunded primary and social care to workforce shortages and inequities in access to care, while addressing growing challenges such as ageing populations and the rise in non-communicable diseases. The ensuing permacrisis - including an ongoing pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis, and the climate emergency - have only exacerbated the situation, stretching health systems, and in particular the health and care workforce, to their limits. Many workers have lost their lives, while others have suffered fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout.

Health and care workers are essential to the operation of health systems, and their availability, accessibility, and quality are all determinants of expanding healthcare service coverage and the attainment of the fundamental right to enjoy the best possible standard of health. Health systems exist to protect people: shielding them from the risk of illness, and the possibility of financial ruin if they do fall sick. They serve as one of the cornerstones of both a thriving economy and society. And it is key that they (and their workforce) are well resourced, dependable, and steadfast in times of crisis.

However, while the pandemic shifted health up the priority list, the cycle of panic and neglect has already begun. The health community must continue to highlight why health and well-being are strategic assets in which to invest, reminding decision-makers that healthier, happier people drive healthier economies and a sustainable planet. Given that health is largely created and determined in other areas, the many systems and policies that influence health and well-being across different sectors must also be better streamlined.

At the European level there have been positive developments: policy work towards a true European Health Union; a new EU global health strategy, and the growing recognition of the importance of One Health approaches. But creating healthy societies also means taking concrete actions at Member State level to build more sustainable and shock-proof systems, in particular addressing the "great resignation" of the health and social care workforce as a key challenge impacting the sustainability of our health systems. We must also overcome the palpable sense of fatigue caused by a feeling that major challenges - such as the climate emergency - are beyond our power and control to influence.

Join us in Gastein and online from 26 - 29 September to discuss how to ride out the current shockwaves and how crises can help catalyse the development of new approaches to health system problems. Together, let's co-create long-term sustainable solutions with actors in all sectors that support health and well-being!