**EHFG 2025 Main Theme**

**Rethinking solidarity in health: healing Europe's fractured social contract**

The social contract, a shared understanding that binds individuals, families, communities, workplaces, and institutions, underpins the cohesion that makes our societies work. Every day, we participate in this contract through mutual obligations such as caregiving, paying taxes, and supporting public services. At its core lies the principle of solidarity, which is essential for our collective well-being.

Solidarity, however, assumes a sense of oneness with others in society. With politicised immigration, disinformation campaigns, and a disconnect between people and politics, a polarised world has emerged in the last decade where solidarity is under threat. Many citizens feel that the social contract is either fractured or too narrowly defined, that it is working for others rather than for them. Even as many people are experiencing improved living and working conditions, this is going hand in hand with stagnating life expectancy, declining quality of life and community relationships, and a distrust in societal systems and political institutions. Once seen as collective assets, health systems are increasingly perceived as costs rather than investments in societal well-being. Rebuilding the social contract must start with health, a sector uniquely positioned to restore trust and solidarity.

Health systems can unite societies by addressing inequalities, fostering resilience, and safeguarding future generations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put an unprecedented strain on these systems, testing their limits. At its height politicians were willing to pay almost anything for our collective protection, including the restriction of people's personal freedom. But since then, political priorities have shifted in line with rising geopolitical tensions: an active war with Russia on Europe's doorstep, an impending economic conflict with China, and an isolationist American President fueled by a web of disinformation. A pivot toward "competitiveness," as emphasised in Mario Draghi's recent report, have diverted attention and resources away from health solidarity. Budgets for social and health programmes compete with those for defence, energy, and industry. Yet, as Enrico Letta's report outlines, a robust health sector is essential to Europe's competitiveness and strategic autonomy. A healthy population not only strengthens the Single Market but also drives innovation, growth, and resilience. Europe's future depends on renewed health solidarity anchored in a stronger social contract.

Healing the present social contract requires revisiting the goals and expectations that constitute our socio-political life. This should be framed by a renewed understanding of Europe's core social welfare values and its need to be economically more self-reliant, innovative, and resilient in a globalised and polycrisis world. A social contract that is fit-for-purpose necessitates that all actors in our societies and systems act upon the principle of solidarity. When it comes to health, what does solidarity mean?  What is the role of health stakeholders in repairing the social contract?

- As primary enforcers and protectors of the social contract, the public sector, from the local to European level, must integrate health into all policies and make strong and effective regulations. These should strengthen comprehensive social safety nets and promote universal access to high-quality care that is responsive to people's needs, and thereby enhances societal trust. Moreover, the public sector has the obligation to protect and uphold our health and well-being systems by securing sustainable funding.

- Civil society is the intermediary between people and the health system and must hold institutions to account to ensure that no one is left behind. It can support governments in health policymaking by ensuring coherence between people's needs and policy implementation. Civil society also advocates for solidarity and equity in health, and bridges social divides thereby building more resilient communities.

- Science and academia underpin these efforts with evidence-based research to guide policies to improve health and well-being, which also contributes to economic development and productivity.

- The private sector drives innovation in healthcare and must ensure affordable and equitable access to its products. These innovations improve outcomes while strengthening Europe's competitiveness and strategic autonomy. By aligning business practices with public health goals, the private sector can strengthen its social license to operate while contributing to societal well-being.

- Individuals help shape the social contract by participating in democratic and economic processes. They hold institutions to account and cultivate collective well-being through solidarity, recognising diverse lived experiences across demographics. Moving beyond groupthink, individuals have a responsibility to respect differences, compromise, and work towards building bridges.

A reimagined social contract centred on health demands solidarity, trust, and accountability. The health sector must lead this transformation by promoting accessibility and equity and driving innovation. In doing so, it strengthens the social contract and ensures Europe's long-term competitiveness and resilience at a time of uncertainty and rising discontent. By prioritising health as the cornerstone of the social contract, Europe can safeguard its values and build a fairer, more hopeful future for all.

Join us in Gastein and online from 30 September - 3 October, and let's explore together how we can heal Europe's fractured social contract for health and well-being!

## POTENTIAL SESSION TOPICS

The keywords below highlight thematic areas that align with the EHFG 2025. They are "food for thought" and not an exhaustive list – we welcome your suggestions!

- A competitive Europe
- Access to affordable medicines
- Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)
- Climate & health
- Commercial determinants of health
- Cost of living & housing crisis
- Demographic challenges & opportunities
- Digitalisation & AI
- European Health Union
- Health workforce
- Healthy ageing
- Mental health

- Migration
- One Health
- Populism
- Social determinants of health
- Social care
- Social innovation
- Social participation
- Social prescribing
- Social protection
- Trust & solidarity
- Universal health coverage
- Well-being economy & societies