



Forum 6

Healthy choices for European citizens

Low Health Literacy costs Europe Millions

- **Decisions *by* the citizens, not *for* the citizens**
- **Un-healthy decisions a major burden to the health-care system**
- **Essential part of life-long education of European citizens**

Motivation to more self-responsibility of citizens and patients is one of the key issues of this year's European Health Forum Gastein. A panel of international experts discussed the importance of empowering Europe's citizens to make Healthy Choices in everyday life. The consensus was that while providing health information is critical, enabling and building Health Literacy is key to improving overall health and to relieving healthcare budgets in Europe.

Dr Ilona Kickbusch, an independent senior health policy consultant based in Switzerland, commented: "Health Literacy is the ability to make sound health decisions in the context of everyday life. Being competent in healthcare makes a big difference for individuals and leads to a better quality of life. It is also a major economic issue. Most health decisions in our societies are made *for* citizens rather than *with* the citizen. And most decisions which are made by people themselves are not based on all the relevant information. Poor Health Literacy is a huge burden on societies, both medically and economically."

It is estimated that low ability to understand health information costs the US government \$73 billion annually (American Medical Association press release, "Hidden problem named as national health priority", 9 January 2003); however, no precise figures are available for Europe. "This lack of information could mean that Europe is spending millions in the healthcare sector that could easily be prevented with improved Health Literacy", added Kickbusch.

At the conference, the experts panel endorsed a number of recommendations aiming to support the goals of EU politicians to improve the overall health of European citizens, by tackling today's massive healthcare challenges such as: the ageing European population; the need to improve the effectiveness of health systems; and to reduce the burden on national healthcare budgets. The recommendations included:

- Conducting a Health Literacy survey in EU member states to assess the current status and economic impact of Health Literacy inadequacies on Europe's societies
- Improved access to relevant information in order to enable European citizens to make Healthy Choices
- Life-long education/Health Literacy is important – citizens need to be empowered to identify and interpret information relevant to their health management, e.g. through providing attractive health education options for adults
- Introduction of Health Literacy education for children in school curriculums

- Creation of partnership initiatives – all stakeholders, from the voluntary, private and public sector, have a role to play in building Health Literacy. This is a collective responsibility and limiting the paradigm to a single player is short-sighted.

“At a time when most countries are investing in a number of initiatives for senior citizens such as enhancing their computer skills for instance, it’s high time to make sure that people are equally equipped to make healthy choices in supermarkets, restaurants, or when talking with their physicians”, commented Kickbusch.

Dr Ian Banks, general practitioner in Northern Ireland and President of the European Men’s Health Forum, stated: “As a physician I fully support the need to improve Health Literacy and Healthy Choices around Europe. Patients need to take more responsibility for their own health. A good knowledge of personal health matters means more than just a better understanding of what your doctor recommends – but it includes this important aspect. On the other hand, governments and institutions, too, need to focus on empowering the individual citizen – if they wish to overcome today’s tremendous healthcare challenges.”

It was also discussed that the balance to find is between equity and choice. With policies promoting more choice for citizens in their pathways of care, the risk is that only those with Health Literacy will be able to take ownership for their health and navigate the system in an effective manner. Vulnerable groups like older, less educated or migrant citizens might 'fall through the net'.

“Europe has the potential to be a global leader in shaping policies that promote Healthy Choices and Health Literacy. It is critical to realise that this is no longer just an issue of importance to the health sector and its outcomes – but to the future development of Europe”, said Kickbusch.

Further information

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