



10 Years of the European Health Forum Gastein From a vision to a European institution

In the beginning there was, as always, a vision. The vision of a meeting place for all groups who are indispensable to a functioning healthcare system: health policymakers, leading representatives of government health offices, scientists, medical practitioners, healthcare managers and, not least, patient representatives and NGOs. An obvious idea, one would think, yet despite the large number of scientific congresses, policy meetings and NGO conferences in Europe, in the middle of the nineties there was no efficient platform for a meeting or an exchange of ideas between the various spheres of interest.

Closing this important gap was and is the founding idea of European Health Forum. And what place could be better suited for it than the Gastein Valley, one of Europe's oldest and most well-known thermal and resort regions and a classic "healthcare region," which with its spectacular natural backdrop also furnishes an extraordinary idea with an extraordinary setting.

"As obvious as the idea was to gather every group responsible for the functioning and further development of the healthcare industry shortly after a significant enlargement of the EU and in a phase in which the consolidation of the European Union was really taking off, the general scepticism was just as enormous, says EHFG President Dr. Günther Leiner, recalling the forum's beginnings. "It was simply doubted that instead of the usual encounters in the scope of tough negotiations the divergent groups would also be in a position to attempt the open exchange of ideas that is indispensable for such an event."

In the ten years of its existence the EHFG has been regularly granted the function of a platform for new concepts and ideas in European healthcare policy. In the first place, it should be mentioned that from the very start the EHFG subscribed to the thought that in the interest of citizens, patients (and taxpayers) healthcare policy must shift from a national to European concern in order to attain a higher degree of efficiency, better medical quality and better accessibility for all EU citizens, also outside of their own country. "Moreover, the EHFG always had the function of discussing the various aspects of this subject, placing them in public debate and providing the impetus for political implementation," former EU Health Commissioner Flynn explains.

But in other areas as well the EHFG played and plays a cutting-edge role. This is obvious with the topic "Healthcare in Other Policy Areas," that is, the evaluation of the health consequences resulting from measures in other areas such as economic, transport or environmental policy. Years ago the "Health Impact Assessment" was established at the European level, was discussed at a professional level at the EHFG and gathered critical momentum from the EHFG for later implementation of the experts' demands.

Right from the start the EHFG and its pursuit of a new approach to a centralized healthcare policy event for the European Union found numerous prominent supporters. Among the most committed supporters of the EHFG who have also made an essential contribution to seeing the ambitious aims of the congress reached were Pdraig Flynn and his successor as EU

Health Commissioner, David Byrne, whose support ensured the active participation of numerous European healthcare institutions from the start

Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a regular holiday guest in Bad Hofgastein, and former German Minister of Health Horst Seehofer, also made an essential contribution by seeing that German healthcare officials were strongly represented at the EHFG from the start (and they still are today). For this reason the EHFG quickly succeeded in obtaining a large number of outstanding experts for the event. Not least the support of the Austrian government, which welcomed the implementation of the Gastein initiative during the first Austrian Council Presidency in the second half of 1998, was of enormous importance. The broad support of numerous leading personalities played a significant role in ensuring that the EHFG was a success story from the first moment on: at the 1st European Health Forum Gastein 200 high-profile experts met in Bad Hofgastein, including EU Health Commissioner Pdraig Flynn, numerous ministers and secretaries of state from all over Europe as well as high-ranking representatives of international organizations such as the WHO and, above all, a large number of top-level representatives from the divisions of the EU Commission which address healthcare and social issues. Within a short time the number of participants rose from 500 to 600 people, a size which has remained unchanged to this day and is ideal for facilitating a breadth of content on the one hand and making it manageable on the other and for distinguishing the event from the mega-congresses in the big city.

“From the start there was this *spirit of Gastein*,” says President Leiner. “Representatives of various groups with which there are to some extent natural conflicts of interest have always found a way to coexist instead of to conflict at the EHFG. The European Health Forum is not only distinguished by its unique substantive concept, but also by its unparalleled atmosphere, and at the 10th EHFG there won’t be few participants I meet who’ve been here since the start of the forum and haven’t missed a year.”

This continuity has also made a substantial contribution to the quality of the EHFG. Participants especially appreciate the fact that newly emergent problems are analyzed and discussed at an early stage here. Particularly for this reason the EHFG has established itself as the most important health policy event in the European Union in just a few years – a role that the former EU Health Commissioner, David Byrne, described very early on. “The European Health Forum Gastein is the health policy university of the European Union.”

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Further press information on the EHFG and pictures can also be found at www.ehfg.org