



Policymakers Should Make the Economic Case for Investment in Public Health

European Health Forum Gastein 2007, Austria. Health policymakers across Europe are under pressure to justify the costs of public health measures. However, making the economic case for health will only be successful if used in combination with other arguments including equity and addressing the causes of bad health – such as poverty. The case for public health will not be won either by simply developing moral or value arguments. Cost efficiency arguments currently dominate the debate in health, but policymakers need to think about the benefits of long-term investment in health and not simply the costs to healthcare systems.

As experts at the 10th European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) in Bad Hofgastein stressed, policy makers, economists and the wider population fail to understand the cost of non-health. Policymakers need to communicate more simply to appeal to individuals and encourage them to change behaviour. “Public health only becomes a public policy priority when it is too late,” says Dr Carolyn Bennett MP for the Canadian House of Parliament and former Public Health Minister, commenting on the cost of the Canadian SARS outbreak in 2003.

“Policymakers need to work across policy areas and learn from each other in order to find practical win-wins - economic arguments can have a role in this type of thinking” said Dr Fiona Adshead, England’s Deputy Chief Medical Officer.

In the past health policymakers have not made much use of economic arguments, presumably because of the perception that economics arguments are too difficult to develop in the context of public health. The meeting also looked at other policy areas: a striking example of best practice is the recent publication of the Stern Report on Climate Change, which has had a major impact in focussing global leaders on the issue of climate change.

Professor Robert Watson of the University of East Anglia said: “The Stern report was fundamental in changing perceptions in climate change – but it was developed as a result of the political will of the British government to make a lasting contribution and ensure that the world take action.”

“In conclusion, economic arguments are an end to a means and should not become the only objective of health policymakers. Political will is also critical to this process” concluded Dr Fiona Adshead.

Further information:

EHFG Press Office, Mag. Thomas Brey, info@mbdialog.at, Tel.: +43 (0) 64 32/20262, mobile: +43 (0) 676/542 39 09

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