



Press release: 13th European Health Forum Gastein, 6 – 9 October 2010

Ageing societies: Experts demand new views on ageing and its potential

New way of looking at ageing: Today, experts at the European Health Forum Gastein called for a paradigm change in how we view the potential of the aged and ageing societies. Instead of emphasizing the drawbacks of the future age pyramid, society should create a framework that allows senior citizens to contribute their skills and experiences as assets for longer than has been the case until now.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2010 – Steadily rising life expectancies and the changing age pyramid in the west are too often reduced merely to factors that make the pension systems unaffordable experts criticize. The potentials and deficits of ageing societies in Europe were on the agenda today at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it has attracted about 600 decision-makers from the fields of health policy, research, science and business and from patient organizations from more than 40 countries.

Europe is undergoing major demographic changes. As early as 2012, the number of people of working age will begin declining while the number of those 60 and older will increase annually by about two million. The biggest pressure will be between 2015 and 2035 when the baby boom generation enters retirement.

Preparedness plan needed

“The ageing of the European population will have a significant impact on the sustainability of our social, economic and health systems,” MEP Antonia Parvanova pointed out. “The aging population is one of the main public health challenges for Europe in the years ahead and requires a real preparedness plan to address it properly, a planned strategy covering financing, organization and effectiveness.”

Age as an asset, not a burden

Mike Martin is Director of the Joint Improvement Team, a working group to promote partnership-based health care and social services in Scotland. He underlined at the EHFG, “The demographic change in connection with financial restraints means that many of the systems in place in Europe today are not sustainable. To resolve this problem, we need a paradigm change that focuses on what older people can still do well instead of on their weaknesses. Our attitude is that older people are not a burden on society; they are one of its assets. Widespread prejudices against ageing and older people have to be measured against reality.” One example is the need for nursing. Only ten percent of Scots over 65 require continuing formal care. There are 40,000 senior citizens 60 or older who provide more than 20 hours of unpaid care to others yet only 3,000 who receive that extent of home care.

Retirement does not mean putting life on hold -- Mental revolt against atrophy from inactivity

Professor Dr. Bernd Marin, Director of the European Center for Social Welfare Policy and Research in Vienna, emphasizes that providing unpaid care to family members is just a fraction of the positive good older people can potentially do for society. What is called for, he said, is a mental revolution. Marin: “People have to understand that you cannot just put life on hold when you retire.” It is highly problematic when the majority of 50 to 65 year-olds is no longer gainfully employed. That means men are not in the work world the last quarter century of their lives and women for an even longer period even though in most cases both groups would be capable of working into their 70s. Marin: “A society

does not become decrepit because of ageing or mass frailty but because of atrophy caused by the inactivity of millions of people of working age who are no longer in the workforce. Use it or lose it – that applies to muscles as much as it does to the brain."

Learning from Asia

Europe can learn from the experiences Asian countries have had. "In East Asia, the baby boom came much earlier. We have already had to devise solutions to these problems," said Shu-Ti Chiou, Director-General of the Bureau of Health Promotion in Taiwan. The Taiwanese Health Ministry hosted the forum of experts on ageing at the EHFG. "Demographic changes imply health policy challenges, which include the provision of adequate care and containment of increasing health care expenditures. We must gauge and continuously monitor health disparities at times of rapid social change. It takes not just health sectors but requires the input of all sectors, from the social and cultural to the economic and political as well as strategic and holistic life cycle approaches."

Shu-Ti Chiou added, "This creates a mindset that keeps people in gainful employment for a much longer time and enables society to benefit from the experiences of ageing. Filial piety is one of the main traditional Asian virtues. In our modern ageing era, Taiwan is recapturing this virtue in families, schools, workplaces, health care settings and communities, developing itself into an age-friendly society, and promoting holistic well-being of the elderly."

Healthy ageing begins early on

Experts at the EHFG stressed the importance of enabling people to age healthfully. "Healthy ageing is not just about prolonging life. It is about promoting the necessary means to enable older people to continue to participate in society and to cope with daily life," said Dr. Elizabeth Mestheneos, President of the AGE Platform Europe, a network of about 150 organizations focusing on people aged 50+. This platform seeks to voice and promote the interests of the 150 million senior citizens in the European Union. Dr. Elizabeth Mestheneos: "Promoting health throughout life is an essential part of any strategy aiming at achieving healthy old age for all."

Forum 1 "Healthy Aging": Hosted by the Ministry of Health, Taiwan: Wednesday, 6 October and Thursday, October 7, 2010

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