



Press release: 13th European Health Forum Gastein, 6 – 9 October 2010
Health policy focus on urban areas

The majority of the world's population now lives in urban areas. In Europe, the strongest trend in urbanisation is seen among new EU member states. This presents new challenges for public health policy. In urban areas many health problems are more pronounced. Added to that, experts at the European Health Forum Gastein point out the enormous health inequalities within cities.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2010 – Increasingly, familiarity with country life among the people of Europe is limited for the most part to excursions or vacation. For the first time, the majority of the world's population now live in urban areas. The highest urbanisation growth levels in Europe are seen in the new EU accession countries. Many countries in Western Europe already have 80% of their population living in urban areas. At the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) today, researchers and policy makers emphasised that it is vital to focus on the health and social environment in urban areas for Europe to be ready for the future.

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

One reason for the focus is the so-called big city phenomenon in public health. Many health risks, in other words, are more distinctly present in urban areas, with a series of diseases turning up more frequently in urban areas than in the countryside. Additionally, factors such as neighbourhood and social status lead to enormous differences in both the state of health as well as access to health services within cities themselves.

“Within our cities, we observe differences in health comparable to differences observed between developing and developed countries,” Dr. Arpana Verma of the UK's University of Manchester explained at the EHFG. “On our own doorstep, we have poverty and social problems associated with urban living. Local actions for partnerships between health professionals, researchers and policy makers are essential for the reduction of such inequalities in health.”

The EU has established multiple partnership arrangements in the field of health improvements for populations living in cities, from initiatives empowering citizens to research projects and programmes.

Research provides basis for decision-making

“Urban areas are major points of contact for carrying out public health initiatives along with places of employment and rural areas,” said Dr. Markus H. Schwarz, member of the EHFG Executive Board and of the Board of Trustees for the foundation for Paracelsus Private Medical University (PMU) Salzburg. PMU is a partner of the EHFG.

Dr. Schwarz stressed that science can give important impetus in this area and provide policy-makers with an important basis for making decisions on effective actions in urban health based on evaluated models and projects. The Institute for Nursing Sciences at PMU set up a project for the first time covering an entire city as an object of study for a public health initiative. This model project aims at making Münster a pain-free city. It analyses for the first time anywhere in the world the complex interconnections in the delivery of care to patients in pain within a municipal healthcare system. The goal is to identify and close any gaps in the delivery of knowledge or services to patients interfacing with hospitals, old-age and nursing homes, hospices and practices specializing in pain treatment. Dr. Schwarz pointed out the potential of the PMU project as a model, noting, “The goal with this focus on

interfaces between different healthcare service providers across institutional and sector lines is to enable comprehensive pain treatment for patients that is networked and therefore cost-effective.”

EURO-URHIS: Evidence-based policy decisions

Health indicators should, if nothing else, provide an important decision basis for optimizing healthcare policy measures in urban areas. In an EHFG forum chaired today by Director General Paola Testori-Coggi, experts introduced a project funded by the Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection, scheduled to last until 2013, using the acronym EURO-URHIS II. “The project aims at developing methodology and tools validated as useful to policy makers at all levels, to assist them in making health gains for urban populations via evidence-based policy decisions,” Arpana Verma explained.

The idea is to collect data level for cross-sectional and longitudinal assessment of all relevant determinants for urban population health, using existing population-based registries and databases, and to apply such tools in the field in a way that can be easily and intuitively used by policy makers.

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