



**Presseausendung zum 13. European Health Forum Gastein, 6. – 9. Oktober 2010**

## **Pilot study shows deficits in understanding of health information -- New European Health Literary Network founded in Gastein**

*Health care information need not just be available in order to be effective. It also has to be located and understood. But there is a deficit in that regard, according to a pilot study on the topic of healthcare literacy presented at the European Health Forum Gastein. A new EU-wide healthcare literacy network should provide for the information flow among all relevant research facilities, media and political decision bodies.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 8 October 2010** – “The future load capacity of our healthcare systems will depend to a considerable degree on how much individual citizens are in a position to assume responsibility for their health or to seek the necessary help and support in a timely manner,” Dr. Helmut Brand suggested in connection with the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). Dr. Brand is professor for European public health and head of the international health department at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands. “The requirements of health literacy in the international debate, have been getting ever more complex and diverse in the course of the past decade.”

This is the 13th annual meeting of the EHFG. About 600 decision-makers from the fields of health care policy, research, science, commerce and patient organizations from more than 40 countries are currently meeting at this, the European Union’s most important healthcare policy conference, in order to discuss vital future issues related to Europe’s healthcare systems.

Previously a mature citizen had to merely understand package inserts and keep his or her doctor appointments at regular intervals. “Today, people must learn how to assess a plethora of often contradictory media information. Additionally it is more and more about providing a beneficial life style early on and preferably not getting sick in the first place. But because very diverse information is circulating, for example, even about the purpose of vaccinations and preventive medical checkups, it is - if nothing else - a matter of acquiring criteria for the evaluation of information,” Prof. Brand explained. “What is needed, on the one hand, is training and information and on the other hand, a legislative balancing act between patronization and assuming too much. Such decisions should be made on the basis of a sufficient factual foundation that we are in the process of acquiring.”

### **European Health Literacy Survey: Pilot study shows large gaps**

The project, under the management lead of the University of Maastricht, that should provide the decision basis for national and EU-wide promotion of health literacy is called the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS•EU). First results of the just-completed pilot phase were introduced at Gastein today with data from Ireland and the Netherlands.

“The results, at least for those two countries, show improvement potential,” according to project coordinator, Dr. Kristine Sørensen. “Only about 65 percent of those asked in the two countries combined indicated they were able to easily understand medical package inserts and only 57 percent the labeling on foodstuffs. These questions rely on the self-assessment of those queried and initial results of our control questions show that the number of those really understanding is even significantly lower.”

“Comforting,” according to the scientist, is that 70 to 90 percent nevertheless trust the health care information of their physicians or pharmacists. “In contrast, only 25 to 55 percent of survey participants trust healthcare information from public authorities, while healthcare information disseminated by the mass media is trusted by only 15 percent that from political parties or celebrities by less than five percent.”

## **Social Media as credible intermediary**

Considerably more trustworthy than the mass media, in contrast, are social media such as internet forums in which concerned persons exchange their own experiences. As explained by Dr. Suzanne Suggs, professor of communications science at Lugano's Università della Svizzera Italiana, "along with the advantage of reliable, experienced-based information, social media also offers quicker answers as well as automatic checking in that postings that do not correspond to one's own experience are as a rule promptly contradicted and misunderstandings clarified." Health-related social networks such as "ParentsLikeMe," "FAN Ticino" or "Healthy Cities, Healthy Lives," offer valuable support for effective decision-making in health matters, according to Dr. Suggs.

## **European health literacy network**

Starting from the University of Maastricht an EU-wide "European Health Literacy Network" was established in the framework of the EHFG that already has attracted 30 members. It aims to help establish a higher level of sustainable health literacy throughout the EU. "The activities range from the promotion of problem-and-solution consciousness through publications, presentations, and national press interviews, to the networking of relevant research facilities, and beyond to the discussions of our findings before the European Parliament, the European Public Health Association Conference und the WHO General Assembly," explained Dr. Geraldine Doyle of the University of Dublin, one of the participant universities.

*Forum 4 "Health literacy in Europe": Organised by Maastricht University and sponsored by an unrestricted educational grant from MSD. Thursday, 7 October 2010*

**[www.ehfg.org](http://www.ehfg.org)**

### **EHFG Press Office:**

B&K Medien- und Kommunikationsberatung

Dr. Birgit Kofler

Ph. during the Congress: +43 6432 3393 239

Mobile: +43 676 636 89 30

Ph. Vienna office: +43 1 319 43 78

E-Mail: [kofler@bkkommunikation.com](mailto:kofler@bkkommunikation.com)