## EHFG President Prof Brand: Health sector can make benefits of a strong Europe clear

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*The future of European health care policy, health care systems and the health of EU citizens after the elections to the European Parliament and the assignment of the new EU Commission was a focal topic of discussion at the 17th European Health Forum Gastein, which opened today in Bad Hofgastein. EHFG President Prof Helmut Brand said the health sector is especially well suited to making people aware of the concrete benefits of a strong Europe.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 1 October 2014** – The role of the EU in health care and the opportunities and risks associated with shaping future European health policy are among the main topics discussed at the 17th European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG), which opened in Bad Hofgastein today. EHFG President Prof Dr Helmut Brand (University of Maastricht): “Following the elections to the European Parliament and the appointment of the new European Commission, the key questions now arise as to which health policy priorities should be set in Europe, which role should the EU play in health care in general and how should the responsibilities be divided. With the European Health Forum Gastein, we are once again offering an important platform where future developments can be discussed in this crucial phase with all the sectors involved.”

**Health moves citizens**

The EHFG President went on to say that the new decision-makers should be concerned about two signals voters sent during the recent EU parliamentary elections: the disappointingly low voter turnout of just 43 per cent and the strengthening of euro-skeptical parties, which now account for more than one fourth of the seats in the European Parliament. “There is a clear mandate for the European institutions to make the benefits of European integration even clearer and more understandable to people. That applies also or in particular to the health care sector.” Health care issues are regularly rated especially high in surveys such as the Eurobarometer polls and likewise play a role among the first European Citizens’ Initiatives which have gathered the required minimum of one million supporters.

**Changes in the EU health care sector**

The appointment of the new EU Commission and the EU Parliament’s new legislative period provide an opportunity to take one step toward the European citizenry on this issue according to President Brand. “Whether the opportunity will be used remains to be seen. No clear picture has yet emerged from the initial decisions the designated president of the EU Commission intends to make.”

Jean Claude Juncker’s proposal to shift responsibility for pharmaceuticals and medical devices from the Directorate-General for Health to the Directorate-General for Internal Market and Industry has triggered massive criticism from public health experts and health policy associations. They view this change as a problematic signal to European citizens that economic interests take precedence over health. Prof Brand: “However this step and its possible ramifications are judged in detail, the proposed shift in responsibility can in any case be seen as a weakening of health concerns within the EU Commission – and that in itself is certainly not desirable.”

**A call for popular initiatives**

Health care would be especially suitable as a sector where the benefits of a strong Europe could be made clear to people and could be something they could experience. Prof Brand: “We have to be creative on this point and could certainly draw inspiration from other policy areas. Take the roaming initiative of the EU Commission, for example. Phoning in Europe has become cheaper thanks to the EU. Even euro-skeptics understand that.  We need a similar initiative with concrete benefits for the health of citizens – a roaming project for health.”

**Scrutinizing new priorities**

The future president of the EU Commission has made known his substantive health policy priorities in a mission letter to the designated EU Commissioner of Health. According to the letter, one priority is to strengthen EU capacities to respond quickly and appropriately to crises associated with food safety and pandemics. A second priority is a prompt evaluation of the decision-making process for genetically modified organisms. Prof Brand: “Both can be seen as signals that issues are being tackled that citizens feel affect them directly and that are a source of worry and anxiety for them.”

The third priority the future president of the EU Commission has given to the Commissioner desgnate pertains to the efficiency and performance of the health care systems. The EU Commission should redouble its efforts to build up expertise for performance assessments and for evaluations of the effectiveness of public health spending and make the findings available. It should do so also explicitly so that this information can be incorporated in the activities of the European Semester, the mechanism for coordinating the economic and budget policy of the member states as part of the stability and growth package. EHFG President Brand: “This is an area that underscores the decisive role of the health system as a factor for the economy and for stability and growth.”

Prof Brand said that the future president of the EU Commission was emphasizing the significance of “subsidiarity and proportionality.”  “We therefore can probably not expect initiatives from the EU Commission to expand the health policy mandate, which was first formulated in the Maastricht Agreement.“

In the last two years, the EHFG has delved into the ramifications of the financial crisis for health. Prof Brand: “We have discussed how the crisis makes people sick and how the health care systems remain crisis-proof yet still innovative. The task we take from these insights is clear: We must devote ourselves now to strategies for a sustainable, patient-oriented health care policy and we need to review and strengthen the health-in-all-policies approach. After all, the health ramifications of certain measures in all areas of policy should be taken into account, especially in economic and budget policy.”

“Electing Health – The Europe We Want” is the motto for this year’s EHFG. Around 600 participants from more than 50 countries are attending the most important health policy conference in the EU to exchange view on key issues affecting European health systems. The future direction of European health policy is the key topic on the conference agenda.

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