

MANAGE

Europe faces unprecedented threats

Two of the core tenets underpinning the European vision – the euro and the Schengen agreement – are coming under unprecedented threat through financial challenges and the impact of the refugee crisis across the continent. It is these critical issues that keynote speaker Professor Martin McKee will tackle during the opening plenary session at the European Health Forum in Gastein in Austria.

Report: Mark Nicholls



Professor Martin McKee. Professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Within the main theme of this year's Conference, "Securing health in Europe - Balancing priorities, sharing responsibilities", the intricacy posed to the capacities of European Health Systems by those fleeing conflict-torn home countries will be high on the agenda. Speaking ahead of the conference, Professor McKee said the global financial crisis had "exposed the fault lines in the design of the European stability mechanism."

In addition, he feared the refugee crisis had placed the Schengen agreement – among the 26 European countries that had abolished passport and other border controls – under extreme pressure with examples of some governments taking actions to reduce free movement. As Professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, he continued: "In both of these cases, the measures that must be taken are obvious, except, it seems, to European governments."

"It is also clear that we need a fair system to distribute refugees across the European Union, regardless of race or religion, yet we have the remarkable situation, in the 21st century, of one member state refusing to take Moslems and others refusing to participate at all. "This is happening at a time when the ordinary people of Europe are opening their arms to welcome those who are fleeing conflict and persecution, adding a new word – Willkommenkultur – to our vocabulary."

Professor McKee, who established the European Centre on Health of Societies in Transition (ECOHOST) – a WHO Collaborating Centre that comprises the largest team of researchers working on health and health policy in central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – also remains concerned that the impact of bailout mechanisms on Greece and other Member States were limiting the freedom of democratically-elected governments to act in the interests of their citizens.

His specific theme of "Securing Solidarity in Europe – From Mare Nostrum to Mare Europaeum" is based on the belief that there is a common European identity, and as someone who sees himself as a European first he believes Europe must work together for a better future for all. "It is only by creating a genuinely inclusive society that we can secure the economic growth, better health, and overall well-being that we all desire," he added.

Over the past decade the European Health Forum Gastein has made a significant contribution to the scope of European health policy in the development of guidelines and cross-border exchange of experience, information and cooperation.

Whilst the past few decades have seen progress in improving health in Europe – with increases in life expectancy and falls in death rates from conditions such as heart attacks – Professor McKee fears the security and resilience of European health systems and the strong value of solidarity are being tested, particularly in countries such as Greece that are most severely affected by austerity.

He outlined how health improvements have been achieved by a combination of measures against tobacco

and greater access to effective health care but feared powerful vested interests are putting profit before health with “real concern” about the impact of trade liberalisation – which has driven tobacco-related illness, diabetes, and other conditions in low and middle income countries.

Secrecy surrounding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership currently being negotiated by the European Commission and the United States is posing “a serious threat to the ability of governments to implement healthy public policies.” With Europe failing to train enough health workers, Professor McKee points out that refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan entering a Europe with its falling birth rate and ageing populations can “make a major contribution to the delivery of health and social care over the years to come.”

“Unfortunately, this means that they will no longer be able to provide much-needed care for those who remain in the countries from which they have departed,” reflected Professor McKee, who is also research director of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, His over-riding concern is that the political structures in Europe to tackle these current issues are not being effectively used.

With a “frightening vacuum of leadership in Europe at present” and some politicians seeking to exploit the current divisions within Europe, there is a greater need for transparency within the Council of Ministers and parts of the European Commission, he concluded. “The idea of Europe was created by political giants, such as Adenauer and Schumann,” he said. “We now search in vain for anyone with that vision.”