

Custom Search

- Home
- News
- Editions
- Special Reports
- Stakeholders
- eBooks
- Contributors
- Subscribe
- Testimonials
- About

Marketing Information

Home > News > Health & Social Care

Sectors

Government

Environment & Energy

Transport

Health & Social Care

Education

Finance

Research & Innovation

HR & Training

ICT

Health & Social Care News



### Has austerity made healthcare a political football?

15/08/17

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There are recent examples where healthcare has been used to win over voters, says Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb, Secretary General, European Health Forum Gastein

Health has become a highly politicised issue. Whether we're talking about President Macron and the French dentist fees, the relocation of the European Medicines Agency or Farage's claim written on a bus that Brexit would save £350,000 million a day; national health systems are often at the heart of contentious political debates. But whilst healthcare is often viewed by politicians as a bargaining tool to win over voters, we have a long way to go before it is truly put at the heart of national and European policies.

The concept of "Health in Policies" (HiAP) is not a new one; politicians across Europe have embraced it, however, the real question is whether it is actually put into practice. At this year's 20th anniversary of the European Health Forum Gastein we set to explore how we can take this concept to the level of political implementation – and the sooner, the better, as it becomes increasingly clear that globalisation, climate change and other major political, economic and societal challenges all have an impact on our physical and mental health.

Rewind 20 years and Europe's future has a very different outlook – it was a world before austerity, we were launching the Euro and integration of new members was a possible reality. It was at this time that technical and political experts first travelled to the Gastein valley, Austria, to explore the social and health benefits of living in Europe. And so began the first European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) – which has grown to become a 'must have' event on the agendas of politicians, decision-makers, and experts from the public and private sectors, science and academia, and civil society. It's a 'go-to' event for prominent stakeholders to come together and share knowledge, expertise and views on Europe and its policies.

Fast forward to today, the EU is struggling with populism that, among other factors, often stems from austerity. Where

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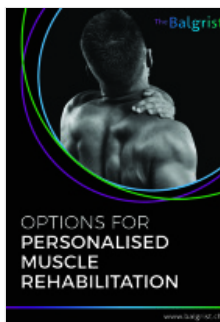


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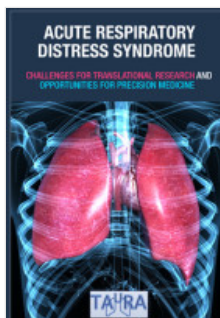


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there is austerity, you can be sure that social sectors are the first to feel the pinch. None more than national healthcare systems. We only need to glance at recent headlines in the UK and French press to understand the importance of functioning healthcare systems to Europeans. Access to health is a fundamental European value that European voters expect to have a right to. But health systems are increasingly under pressure as they try to adapt to an increased burden of chronic diseases, migration and ageing populations. All this, with a squeezed healthcare budget and a shrinking workforce. Whilst health is, for the most part, a competence of EU Member States, it's worth noting that combatting these challenges could be much faster by leveraging shared experiences.

#### Access to health

Europeans may have a lot to complain about when it comes to their own national healthcare systems and the role of the EU in their daily lives. But whilst we may be quick to squabble, we mustn't forget the benefits that Europe provides. Travel across Europe, for example, and you will carry close to hand your European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), granting you the right to access state-provided healthcare in any of the EEA countries. What about food security? Thanks to the EU we can be sure that the food on our plates is safe for consumption. Collaboration between EUROPOL and INTERPOL tackles food fraud on a global scale, ensuring that the food entering Europe is what it says on the tin. As we see a dangerous rise in childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, discussion at EU level on nutrition, physical activity, marketing of foods and healthy lifestyles is incredibly relevant to everyday Europeans.

As we look towards this year's Gastein Forum, it is clear that the debate on Europe and its policies on health will be rife. All this with a squeezed healthcare budget and a shrinking workforce. Whilst health is, for the most part, a competence of EU Member States, it's worth noting that combatting these challenges could be met much faster by leveraging shared experiences. The European Health Forum Gastein is an ideal setting for sharing these experiences.

With the main theme of 'Health in All Politics', this year's Forum will be structured around 4 distinct tracks: Health in All Policies, health systems, access to medicines and innovation, Big Data & ICT. A series of sessions and workshops in these tracks will address a number of topics such as pricing of medicines, vaccines hesitancy, health literacy, the environmental implications on health, personalised healthcare, the future of cancer treatments, big data and many more. With so much ground to cover, I hope you will join us on 4-6 October 2017 in Austria and celebrate EHFG's 20th anniversary.

Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb has been actively involved in the field of public health over the last 15 years.

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