

PRESS RELEASE

European health policy experts look at disruptive ideas to transform health and societal well-being

- *600 policy experts from across Europe met at the annual 2019 European Health Forum Gastein (2-4 October 2019) and explored disruptive proposals for health transformation, which include letting public authorities pay patients for their expertise, completely revamping medical curricula and developing national and European-level legislation on patient blood management.*
- *Ministers and European Commission shared plans for upcoming EU presidencies and new European Commission, including a strategy on Artificial Intelligence, a Commission Communication on the economy of well-being and a strategy on mental health.*
- *Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG) University of Bath was awarded the First European Health Leadership Award and participants voted for VAXOn as the winning Hackathon solution for vaccine hesitancy.*

Bad Hofgastein, Austria, 4 October 2019 – The 22nd edition of the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) closed after three days of sessions around the topic of “A healthy dose of disruption? Transformative change for health and societal well-being”. Proposals challenging the status quo included a complete revamp of medical curricula, an overhaul of finance flows, ditching old economic measures and replacing them with a new economy of well-being. Patients’ voice was clearly heard, with calls for patients to get angry to demand more from health systems, for patient advocates to be given a paid seat at the tables that govern health systems, for full access to electronic health records for patients – to name but a few. Youth and the silver society were equally persuasive in insisting that they should play a pivotal role in the future of health in Europe.

Ministers and high-level representatives from EU Member States and beyond, as well as from WHO EURO and the European Commission joined the discussions and outlined their aspirations for the future of health. They also shared what is on their radar for the upcoming months: a “zero pollution ambition for Europe”, a strategy for Artificial Intelligence and a strategy on biodiversity, a Commission Communication on the economy of well-being, and a strategy on mental health.

A prominent topic, a red thread in the discussions, was the power of digital to disrupt. Speakers and participants agreed on the fact that digital in itself is not the aim, but rather a tool to facilitate the transformation of health and well-being. The keynote delivered by Stephen Klasko, President of the Thomas Jefferson University (Philadelphia) and CEO of Jefferson Health set out the size of the challenge: “We are delivering Star Wars technology in Fred Flinstone’s delivery system” he said. There was consensus on the fact that digital transformation should be driven by data, but that, the enormous potential of technologies notwithstanding, the real disruption lies in finding ways to address health and well-being holistically and in changing long-ingrained infrastructures and habits. The case for a new economy of well-being needed to replace the existing economic model was made

powerfully by Esko Aho, CEO at Verbatum and former Prime Minister of Finland. He saw “Silver is the new green” being a key disruptor. Batool Al-Wahdani, Youth Advocate and Past President of the International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations (IFMSA) warned that youth would not stand by and accept tokenism.

Climate change and its increasingly strong and undeniable effect on people’s health, which is rapidly becoming a public health emergency was seen as an important disruptor. This led to questions about what health systems could learn from environmental activists and what role technology could play. 4.7% of carbon emissions come from the health sector. This makes the sector the 5th highest pollution emitter; and achieving zero carbon emissions is an astounding challenge and will require radical steps to be taken by hospitals, industry, healthcare professionals and patients.

The 600 health experts from the fields of government and civil society, academia and business attending the event also experienced disruption with unconventional session formats that encouraged participants to open their minds to unconventional ideas and new practices, as well as discussing concrete and practical solutions that could pave the way to the transformation of health and societal well-being. As is common practice at the EHFG, the conference participants took on difficult as well as controversial issues, such as how access to medicines could be accelerated, how payers could be de-incentivised from keeping portfolios fragmented, and how finance ministers could be stimulated to adopt measures that take to heart people’s well-being. The discussions touched upon a very wide range of topics, from legislation on patient blood management to progress in developing cannabis for medical use and commercial determinants influencing policies, and from access to healthcare for transgender and migrant populations to the link between housing and health outcomes.

The EHFG 2019 spotlighted individuals and projects that have played a pivotal role in challenging the status quo of health in Europe. The Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG), winner of the EHFG’s first European Health Leadership Award, is one of those champions, having challenged the tobacco industry’s ability to influence government and bringing attention to the commercial influences on health. TCRG announced that they would soon be looking into adapting their model to research obesity and alcohol with the same methodology. A 48-hour hackathon, of seven teams of 35 participants from over 20 countries, competed to co-create novel solutions to meet the growing challenge of vaccine hesitancy. The conference participants chose VAXOn as the winning team. VAXOn proposes to use big data analytics to identify anti-vaxer groups and to provide reliable analysis of their activities for governments, and NGOs, helping them to develop timely and effective vaccines campaigns and in doing so decrease vaccine hesitancy.

Clemens Martin Auer, President of the EHFG, said that the EHFG 2019 delivered on its promise: “we wanted to step out of our comfort zones, and explore solutions that deliver proactive, rather than reactive health systems. I am a true believer that future patient-focused solutions depend on unleashing the power of quality of digital infrastructures across the EU”, he said.

Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb, Secretary General of the EHFG, additionally highlighted that the 2019 EHFG may have been the most interactive and dynamic editions so far. “The different set-ups

of the workshop and sessions really helped to involve every single individual in the discussion, resulting in spicy conversations and a set of concrete solutions moving forward.”

Finally, this year’s EHFG marked the farewell edition for Vytenis Andriukaitis in his capacity as European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety. As he said, “if we are to overcome the many challenges society faces, we need to see much more honesty from people who govern and much more disruption in terms of how we think about health. This is a joint responsibility for all of us – policy makers, industry, NGOs, patients on the things that really matter.”

About European Health Forum Gastein

The European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) was founded in 1998 as a European health policy conference. It aims to provide a platform for all stakeholders from the field of health and beyond. Over the past decade, the EHFG has established itself as an indispensable institution in the scope of European health policy. It has made a decisive contribution to the development of guidelines and above all the cross-border exchange of experience, information and cooperation. Leading experts participate in the annual conference held in the Gastein Valley in the Austrian Alps for three days in October.

Launched at the EHFG 2019

- [FutureProofing Healthcare Sustainability Index](#)
- [Time matters: a call to prioritize brain](#), Oxford Health Policy Forum

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