

PRESS POINT – THE GLOBAL CLIMATE CRISIS: A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

Friday, 4 October 2019

Today's EHFG press point was themed "The global climate crisis: a public health emergency". It set out to explore the effects of climate change on public health, which include but are not confined to an increase risk of infectious diseases, allergies, but also mental diseases, diabetes and lung cancer. Press Point participants shared their views and good practices on how the climate change as a public health emergency can be mitigated.

**Brigitte Zarfl, Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection,
Austria**

"The effects of climate change on health are real. It affects all areas of life, it is a health issue, but it is also an issue that affects the health of poorer people in society, it impacts the labour market.

There are three areas where we can put in measures:

First, allergies and vector-borne diseases are expected to increase due to changes in temperatures. This will lead to plants migrating, new mosquito types, and other changing conditions. We will have to react against these developments at in our health systems at a national level.

Second, increasing temperatures pose a real health challenge. In Austria, this summer was the hottest ever measured. This is not acyclic. It means that we have to inform vulnerable groups on how to react to changing conditions. In Austria, we have installed hotlines people can call to get answers to their health concerns related to the heat. European countries are in a privileged situation as the effects of climate change can still be managed by helping the more vulnerable. Other regions in the world, especially Africa, witness more dramatic changes, whole communities are affected, rich and poor. As a result, people are having to leave their homes and communities.

Third, we need to address the ecological footprint of the health sector. In Austria, roughly 7% of the CO₂ production can be attributed to the health sector. A major reason for this is the mobility of persons. We have started to concentrate on a strategy that reduces the distance between people and healthcare. More generally, we need to realise more efficiency in the health sector, because pharmaceuticals and medical products have a significant environmental footprint.

Climate change means that we will see new health problem, problems we have not seen before."

**Veronica Manfredi, Director for Quality of Life (Air, Water, Marine Environment,
Industrial Emissions & Safety), DG Environment, European Commission**

"The new European Commission is going to take a major step forward in tackling the climate crisis, and the problems caused by it, including health problems. We have ten years to change the way we are living, producing and consuming."

"European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen is prioritizing the European Green Deal, aimed at making sure we tackle root causes of climate crisis in combination with pollution. Why? Because it is largely the same economic sectors that are responsible for the largest CO₂ and pollution production."

"We need to transform agriculture, where excessive use of pesticides, fertilizers, inappropriate management of nutrients are major causes of pollution. With the Industrial Emissions Directive we have managed to reduce emissions. But there continue to be challenges, like managing the effects of fossil fuels in terms of CO₂ emissions and air pollution. The travel and transport sectors

also pose challenges. President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has already announced her intent of placing the aviation and shipping sectors under the EU emissions trading system (ETS). She will pursue negotiations at the global level in this regard as well.”

“The European Commission’s Directorate General for the Environment will be in charge of the Zero Pollution Ambition for Europe. This is an agenda that will not be implemented in isolation. It is part of a comprehensive set of actions that will enable the European Commission to lead on a more ambitious strategy for biodiversity and the circular economy. Why? Because we see that the only way to tackle the climate crisis is to get nature back and urgently on board. We have to make sure that we remove all polluting sources that impede our ecosystems. Only then can we be resilient.”

“This includes tackling sea pollution. At the upcoming conference in Naples (3-5 December 2019), which will be organised under the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, and which will include a focus on protecting citizen’s health, we hope that we can announce steps to achieve a sulphur-free and nitrogen-free initiative for the Mediterranean.”

Piroska Östlin, Acting Regional Director, WHO Europe

“The World Health Organization (WHO) aims to address major challenges related to climate change. One challenge is the way in which climate change threatens the rights of people in the sense that it undermines fundamental elements that we all need for health and wellbeing: safe drinking water and food supplies. Climate change also threatens the functioning and integrity of health systems infrastructures at a time when we most need them.”

“The Paris Climate Agreement is the most important public health agreement of this century. Reducing emissions from fossil fuel combustion reduces gas and air pollution, which causes 600.000 deaths in the WHO Europe region every year and which increases the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). If Member States would honor the commitments of the Paris Climate Agreement, we would prevent 180.000 yearly deaths in the region. This would allow to save 2% of the GDP in the region.”

“WHO advocates for switching to environmental-friendly health systems. We advocate for clean transport, low carbon energy use, cycling and green areas. All these elements benefit health and decrease the burden of NCDs.”

Stefi Barna, Co-Director of the Sustainable Healthcare Education Network, Centre for Sustainability Healthcare, UK

“The Sustainable Healthcare Education Network of the Centre for Sustainability Healthcare works together with national entities to assess the way in which the health sector contributes to climate change. 4.7% of carbon emissions come from the health sector – that is huge. It is ahead of the carbon emissions of a country the size of Japan. It makes the health sector the 5th highest pollution emitter.”

“The first rule for health professionals is to do no harm. But here, it is very clear that the healthcare sector is part of the problem. So, what can we do about this? We have to change existing infrastructures which are linked to 20 to 30% of the emissions. We have to de-carbonise our energy systems and create carbon-neutral hospitals. Pharmaceutical and medical equipment industry is also a major polluter (for example 21% of the carbon footprint of the National Health Service in England comes from pharmaceuticals. 11% come from medical equipment). Healthcare professionals and patients can also play a role by reducing unnecessary travel. We really have to change.”



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“Reducing the environmental footprint of the health sector is important, but the best thing we can do to keep people healthy is to keep them away from hospitals. Prevention is the superpower and public health is the sector that can drive it.”

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact:
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