



Tallinn, Copenhagen, 27 June 2008

European ministers sign groundbreaking charter on health systems

New charter brings equity, performance and accountability to health sector

Ministers of health from the 53 countries of the WHO European Region today signed a new charter on health systems, committing themselves to concrete and measurable action on strengthening health systems that will allow both their own people and the international community to hold them to account.

All countries have pockets of people who miss out on quality health care. The charter stresses that strong health systems must be put in place to remove barriers such as insufficient access, costs and lack of information, to ensure coverage across the board. The charter declares: "... Today, it is unacceptable that people become poor as a result of ill-health. ...We, the Member States, commit ourselves to: promote shared values of solidarity, equity and participation through health policies, resource allocation and other actions, ensuring due attention is paid to the needs of the poor and other vulnerable groups. ..."

WHO estimates that, each year, health expenses cause 150 million people to suffer financial catastrophe and push 100 million below the poverty line.

"Health is the right of everyone and it has value in itself. It is in the interest of all governments to invest in the health of their populations, as improving the health of the population makes a material contribution to the wealth of the nation," said Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe, at the charter signing ceremony today.

"I am personally thrilled by the value system so clearly evident in the Tallinn charter," said WHO Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan, addressing the Conference. "As we now know, cash, commitment and commodities cannot boost adequate progress in the absence of delivery systems that reach those in great need, on an adequate scale, in time," she said.

The charter details the key actions needed to make health systems stronger, such as improving transparency and accountability for health spending and ensuring that spending is aligned to policy objectives. "Increasing investment in health will pay

dividends only if it's well spent," said Dr Nata Menabde, Deputy Regional Director, WHO Regional Office for Europe. "There is no 'right' or 'optimal' size of budget that should be devoted to health. We do not want to give the impression that simply increasing the level of budget allocations to the health sector will solve all problems. The health system needs to increase and demonstrate its capacity to use the money in a prudent and transparent manner."

As part of the preparations for the charter, WHO conducted studies that have produced evidence of the link between the health and wealth of the population, making the case for giving serious political attention to the performance of health systems.

WHO's research shows that in the past the importance of the health system to the general health of the population has been underestimated, as has the impact of better health on economic growth. Rather than being seen as a 'necessary burden', investment in effective health systems should be considered as an investment in the future well-being of the population.

Speakers at the Conference stressed that good health systems should not be a luxury that only rich countries can afford, but a fundamental part of the social and physical infrastructure that supports a country's prosperity, cohesion, and social well-being, underlining that the charter places particular emphasis on ensuring people are treated with dignity and respect when they come into contact with their health system.

Signing the Tallinn charter on behalf of all European ministers were Ms Maret Maripuu, Minister of Social Affairs of Estonia and President of the Conference, and Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

The final text of the charter will be published on the web site of the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

All sessions of the Conference, including the charter signing ceremony, have been streamed live. Recordings are available on the Conference web site and interviews with keynote speakers and leading experts will continue to be available after the Conference.

For more information, contact:

Liuba Negru
Press and Media Relations Officer
WHO Regional Office for Europe
Scherfigsvej 8, DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø
Denmark
Mobile: +37 258 509 081, +45 20 45 92 74.
E-mail: LNE@euro.who.int