



Note for the press

Baltic health officials and international experts meet in Tallinn to discuss medicines policies and the effects of the economic crisis on the access to medicines

Tallinn, 2 – 3 September 2010

For the seventh time in a row the Ministers of Health together with senior officials and policymakers from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are meeting in annual Baltic Policy Dialogue to discuss current challenges they face in moving health and health systems forward in their country.

For this year's meeting, which is taking place in Tallinn (Estonia), the central theme of discussions will be the economic crisis and its effects on pharmaceutical policies. The Baltic States are among the most severely hit by the global economic downturn. International evidence shows the negative long-term impact economic recessions have on people's health status due to growing uncertainty, soaring unemployment and shrinking household budgets. At a time where support and protection from the public sector are most needed, financial resources risk falling short as a result of budget cuts imposed by the decrease in fiscal revenues. With pharmaceuticals already taking up a high share of total spending on health (representing between 20% in the case of Latvia and 32% in the case of Lithuania), access to medicines may become compromised, especially since out-of-pocket spending for medicines in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania lies above the EU average.

Host of this meeting, Estonia's Social Affairs' Minister Hanno Pevkur welcomed the occasion to exchange experience on how to address the challenges created by the crisis with his counterparts from both Lithuania and Latvia as well as with international experts from the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies and the London School of Economics and Political Science. "Access to medicines is an important part of effective health care," said minister Pevkur. "Economic crisis and new challenges like introducing e-health systems in our countries have been main areas for our discussions. The changes we have implemented were aimed to improve patients' awareness on prices, setting incentives to pharmacies and to modify the price setting," added the minister.

Hans Kluge, of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, said: "It is important to preserve equitable access to needed medicines. Especially in these difficult times governments must continue to invest in people's health as it will also affect a country's economic potential. To do this in an effective way Ministries of Health and the Health Insurances need to review their pricing and reimbursement policies to focus on equitable access to essential medicines and offer financial protection, they also need to ensure value for money in the pharmaceutical sector, and the crisis may offer an opportunity to increase efficiency and cut waste in the medicines area".

In the meeting the Lithuanian delegation presented measures currently underway to reduce medicines' prices and to introduce generic prescribing. Didzis Gavars, Minister of Health of Latvia, also emphasized the need to better evaluate the clinical effectiveness of new drugs and to stimulate more rational and cost-effective use of drugs. "This requires the involvement and responsibility of all actors, public authorities, health insurance bodies, the industry, the pharmacists, the prescribers as well as the patients themselves, but also a good capacity in the public sector to coordinate the efforts, put in place in Latvia", he said.

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