WHO evaluates a decade of Estonia’s primary health care reform

On Thursday 6 January 2005, WHO experts in charge of evaluating the performance of the Estonian primary health care system over the last decade will make public the results of a one-year assessment. The Estonian Government commissioned this assessment from the WHO Regional Office for Europe in order to further fine tune the country’s primary health care system and its monitoring. To complete the assessment, various interest groups such as primary health care doctors and nurses, local decision-makers, reform designers and researchers and national policy-makers were interviewed.

The experts found the primary health care reforms to have been “a success story that other countries could learn from”. Effective family medicine, efficient health care legislation, equitable distribution of services and access, and an excellent training programme for health care specialists are quoted among Estonia’s achievements. Nevertheless, there are still areas for improvement and the patient focus of the primary health care strategy could be enhanced. The reform has not yet reached its full potential in some key areas, such as financing, resource allocation, organizational arrangements and service provision. Further, fine tuning of the system will require action on many fronts, including empowering nurses and enhancing their teamwork with physicians, increasing the quality of and access to services, and ensuring sustainable financing. The system also needs efficient tools to contain out-of-pocket health care expenses.

The assessment shows that the management of chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy lifestyles are and will still be particular challenges for the primary health care system in the country. Estonia currently bears a considerable disease burden from chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases.

“This assessment was needed to appraise the country’s performance in primary health care to date and how it might do better in the future. Our immediate objective was to support the country in undertaking further challenges in primary health care development, particularly as a new EU member state,” says Dr Nata Menabde, Director, Division of Country Support at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. “The findings show that Estonia has made great strides in building up a strong primary health care system. There are of course still many challenges to address. But with the commitment already shown by the Government, and with the support of development partners, including WHO, much can be achieved in the immediate future.”

The press is invited to attend the assessment presentation meeting at 12:30 on 6 January at the Ministry of Social Affairs, 29 Gonsiori Street, Tallinn. Journalists who wish to attend the meeting or interview participants should register with, or contact, Jarno Habicht, Head of the WHO Office in Estonia (see below).
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