WHO profiles Estonia’s performance in health care

During the economic transition, Estonia undertook a number of reforms and modernized its health system. This is stressed in the new health care systems in transition (HiT) profile for Estonia and several health system financing documents to be issued by the WHO Regional Office for Europe this week. The book and the documents will be officially launched jointly by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, the health systems financing programme of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and the Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia on Thursday, 10 March, in Tallinn.

“The book we are launching today aims to contribute to a growing body of evidence on the impact of health system policies in individual countries. The comparison of different policies in countries of the European Region gives sufficient background to tackle the remaining challenges in Estonia and other countries” said Dr Josep Figueras, Research Director and Head of Secretariat, the European Observatory on Health Care Systems and Policies.

The documents highlight the assets of the Estonian health-financing system. The proportion of health expenditure funded publicly is higher than in many transition economies and closer to that of high-income countries. This enables the system to provide adequate financial protection to most of Estonia’s population. Most public funding in the health sector is channelled through a single national body, making the strategic allocation of resources easier and more efficient.

The health financing system still faces a number of challenges. For instance, health insurance coverage is not universal. In addition, out-of-pocket payments are a high burden for a significant number of the most vulnerable people in Estonia. Yet Joseph Kutzin, Regional Adviser for Health Systems Financing at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, believes that “in the course of the transition, Estonia has progressively implemented a modern and transparent health-financing system whose organization is coherent with the crucial objectives of providing financial protection to its citizens and aligning incentives to produce services efficiently”.

Looking at the general trend that links countries’ incomes to their expenditure on health, Estonia lies slightly below the average for Europe. Acknowledging that the health of the population lags behind the European average, there may be some scope for additional strategically oriented investments in health. Priority areas could include public health action to reduce the disease burden caused by risky behaviour, such as drinking, smoking, poor diet and drug abuse, or scaling up both prevention and treatment activities to respond to the increasing number of HIV/AIDS cases.

In essence, the whole health sector still faces a number of challenges. Estonia has to develop and implement specific policies to reduce inequalities in health and health behaviour, and to
improve the regulation of private care provision. The implementation and coordination of these activities will require a prominent stewardship role at national and regional level. Additional challenges can be found in the health system’s aim to respond adequately to the rising expectations of the population.

“Helping countries build strong and efficient health systems and public health programmes is the main concern of the WHO Regional Office for Europe. This objective is defined by our mandate,” says Dr Nata Menabde, Director, Division of Country Support at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. “Our previous HiT profiles for Estonia were issued back in 1996 and 2000. We are pleased to benchmark the progress Estonia has made since our last assessments and we will assist the country in dealing with the challenges that remain.”

The press is invited to attend the launch of the HiT profile on 10 March at 9:15, at the Ministry of Social Affairs, 29 Gonsiori Street, Tallinn. A press conference will take place after the launch in room 429. Journalists who wish to attend the meeting/press conference or interview participants should register with, or contact, Jarno Habicht, Head of the WHO Country Office in Estonia (see below).

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About HiT profiles of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies

The Observatory’s HiT series features country reports that provide analytical descriptions of the European Region’s health systems. The reports follow a template allowing comparisons between countries and aiming to support evidence-based health policy-making. The HiT series provides a wealth of knowledge on health systems’ design, organization, management, financing and reform for national and international policy-makers, international organizations and students of health science and health policy.

European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies

The European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies supports and promotes evidence-based health policy-making through comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the dynamics of health care systems in the WHO European Region. It is a partnership between the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the governments of Belgium, Finland, Greece, Norway, Spain and Sweden, the European Investment Bank, the Open Society Institute, the World Bank, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Health systems financing programme, WHO Regional Office for Europe

The health systems financing programme supports Member States in designing and assessing their health-financing systems and reforms, guided by the objectives of solidarity, financial risk protection, and the promotion of health system efficiency and transparency. This support is carried out through policy dialogue with countries, facilitating the exchange of evidence and experience between countries, and collaborating with partner agencies that are more directly involved in supporting countries to implement health-financing reforms.

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