HEALTH FORUM IN ESTONIA

Today, 24 November, the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs hosts a national Health Forum in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) to discuss a long-term vision for health policy in Estonia. One of the pillars of the Initiative for Strengthening Health Systems, launched at the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2005, is to improve country work by providing a health system focus to vertical health programmes. This includes a debate on health policy and health systems to support countries in developing a long-term vision for improving people’s health.

“Across the Region, all countries, even the wealthiest, face newfound health challenges. All must deal with mounting expectations, rising costs and multiple health crises,” says Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “Effective reform requires a systemic approach that encompasses more than just action to enhance health care services. Just as importantly, it includes measures addressing disease prevention, promotion of healthy lifestyles and a positive influence on health determinants. Helping countries arrive at these solutions requires coordination of resources, global reach and a deep knowledge base – and this is where WHO is able to play a vital role.”

Health policies and health systems development should be built into the ethical values of the WHO European Region in terms of health as a human right, solidarity, equity and public participation. This, when discussed with the general public through appropriate channels, helps the health system and those who participate in it to achieve three overall goals: a better level and more equitable distribution of health, responsiveness to people’s expectations, and protection of the population against the financial risk of health care costs.

Progress towards health system goals is directly linked to how well such systems carry out four key functions: stewardship (oversight and governance), financing (including revenue collection, fund pooling and purchasing), service provision (for personal and non-personal health services) and resource generation (investment in personnel as well as key inputs and technologies). By examining these four functions and how they interact, it is possible to understand the determinants of health system performance. This forms a solid foundation for considering major policy initiatives.

The Estonian health system faces a series of challenges in terms of its long-term health policy. On financing, there is the challenge of moving towards universal insurance coverage to ensure equal access to services. There is also the need to ensure sustainability and to increase the revenue base in different ways to complement payroll taxes. In terms of health service delivery, there is a need to strengthen and broaden primary health care to ensure continuity of care and access to high-quality care in outpatient clinics and hospitals. Looking to resources,
there is a need to sustain the supportive environment for health workers in order to retain motivated staff in the health sector. On the public health front, there is a need to scale up targeted preventive measures and to ensure universal access to treatment in order to reverse the HIV epidemic. As to noncommunicable diseases, there is a need to reduce the premature burden of disease due to such risk factors as alcohol and tobacco use, an unhealthy diet and a low level of physical activity.

WHO’s previous collaboration with Estonia has revealed a systematic approach to health system, whereby support to various stakeholders has been arranged in developing evidence for health policy or updating health system policies (such as for HIV/AIDS), analysing health financing, or evaluating service provision such as primary health care or hospital sector restructuring. This has shown a good example to the rest of Europe, and if applied appropriately in the long term will lead to an improvement in the health of the population. In addition, a systematic approach can provide useful information for other countries, and the current Health Forum in Estonia will be a valuable contribution to our thinking about our common European future.

The press is invited to attend the Health Forum press conference organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Journalists who wish to interview participants should register with, or contact, Jarno Habicht, Head of the WHO Office in Estonia (see below).

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