

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

Commissioner Borg addresses the EU Health Policy Forum on "Investing in Health"

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends the EU Health Policy Forum

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OPENING SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you today to meet you, the members of the EU Health Policy Forum.

This important Forum covers a wide range of interests and perspectives across the public health spectrum – united by a common commitment to achieve better health outcomes for all.

The collaboration between key stakeholders, such as yourselves, and the European Commission, enables a fruitful and continuous dialogue on matters of common concern.

I am also very pleased that Ms Parvanova and Ms Kadenbach are joining us today to lend the European Parliament's input and support to these efforts.

Health is attracting more and more attention across the European Union. Part of this increased focus stems from the difficult economic situation which we are facing in Europe.

But the fundamental pressures facing public health systems were already present before the economic crisis took hold. The crisis, however, puts the spotlight on the urgent need to address successfully the challenges of the future.

And this brings me to the issue I would like to discuss with you today: investing in Health.

The ageing population; the rising tide of chronic diseases; the increasing demand for healthcare; the development of innovative and often expensive new technologies; the increasing expectations of citizens – all of these factors put European health systems under growing pressure.

And it is clear that we will have to face these challenges with fewer resources. For the first time in decades, healthcare expenditure is declining in many Member States – largely in response to the need to cut public expenditure.

Too often health is perceived as a cost, and not an asset for the future.

This is why in February the Commission adopted a paper on 'Investing in health' which forms part of an overall package on "Social Investment".

Through this initiative, the Commission extends the EU Health Strategy by reinforcing its key objectives. It also establishes the role of health within the wider context of economic recovery – the Europe 2020 Strategy.

We all recognise that health is a value in itself. In addition, health is a key contributor towards achieving economic prosperity and a job-rich recovery from the current crisis.

Let me break this down into three key elements:

First – investing in sustainable health systems.

Health systems in Europe are at the core of our high level of social protection.

They absorb some 15% of all government expenditure. If nothing changes, this share is projected to increase by almost one third by 2060.

Clearly, such an increase would not be sustainable. We have to act quickly – but judiciously, not rashly.

Our reactions must not amount to a short-term fix. On the contrary, we must avoid the lure of easy savings in the short term, which might only serve to store up greater expense and poorer health in years to come.

In this regard, I can only express my dismay that perhaps the biggest contraction in recent years has happened in relation to disease prevention and health promotion activities. This falls into the very trap that I have just mentioned.

Fiscal constraints should be reconciled with the necessary structural reforms to ensure the sustainability of health systems.

International comparisons show that it is not only the amount of money spent, but also how it is spent which determines a country's health status.

Efficiency gains can be achieved and there are ways in which we can spend better to achieve the twin aims of a more efficient use of public resources and the provision of high quality healthcare.

There is no simple solution. There are, however, common threads which can help us to achieve better value for money.

As you know, the Commission is working with the Member States in a Reflection Process on Health Systems which seeks to identify effective and forward-looking ways of investing in health. Conclusions from this process will be drawn by the end of this year.

Another way forward is to improve cost-efficiency through sound innovation, notably using Health Technology Assessment more consistently and applying successful e-health solutions.

Finally, we could develop together better tools to assess the efficiency of health systems. I would be very interested to hear your views on this particular aspect.

To sum up on health systems, we need to make certain that the reforms we undertake guarantee universal access to high quality healthcare, and cater not only to current needs, but also to the needs of generations to come.

The second element on the road to recovery is **investing in health as human capital**.

Good health boosts economic growth. Healthy people are active and productive people. Improving the level of population health leads to positive economic outcomes.

Europe needs a healthy workforce to achieve the healthier and wealthier economy to which we aspire.

It is therefore essential to promote cost-effective disease prevention and health promotion measures that can reduce long-term treatment costs and improve health outcomes.

Some very interesting examples of actions based on this principle are being developed under the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing.

Investing in health also means investing in our health workforce. The health and social work sector has in recent years been the single largest job creator within the European Union; and has the capacity to create up to 8 million jobs between now and 2020.

Many of these jobs will be replacements for retiring professionals and we should now be actively planning how best to train, recruit and retain these future professionals.

The third and last element I would like to raise today concerns **investing to reduce health inequalities**.

Reducing health inequalities contributes to greater social cohesion and helps to reduce poverty.

Health inequalities, which are particularly acute in vulnerable groups within society, translate into poor quality of life for too many people, and to a major loss of human and economic potential.

Here again, the need to maintain universal access to high quality and safe healthcare is of paramount importance, as is addressing the social determinants of health.

The Commission will present this Spring a report on progress made since 2009 in bridging health inequalities across the EU.

Disease prevention initiatives, safer environments and healthier lifestyles are all key elements in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, and an important step for reaching the Europe 2020 poverty reduction targets.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges I have outlined affect all of us as professionals, but also as private citizens and as patients.

We must seize the opportunity to address common challenges together.

I am very interested to hear your views on the approach I have outlined and on possible future action at European level.

Your views, your expertise and your input to shape the steps ahead are crucial to ensure a healthier and sustainable Europe of the future.

Finally, I would appeal to all Forum members to spread the message, at national as well as European level, of the urgent need to invest wisely in health systems and public health policies.

Thank you.