

Health in Europe: A Strategic Approach

Response to the European Commission's Discussion Document for a Health Strategy

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Who we are

At the Alliance for Health and the Future (the Alliance), we believe that it is in the common interest of all to encourage healthy and productive ageing throughout life. We therefore work across the major challenges and opportunities presented by the demographic shift, including the need for prevention and maintaining good health, the economic impact of the ageing population, and employment issues which affect people's ability to stay productive.

The role of the Alliance is to be a catalyst to help achieve this common vision. Using high quality research generated by the International Longevity Centres¹ as our foundation, we provide a source of innovation, expertise and best practice to decision makers, employers and the public. We believe that all the players who can play a role in health and wellbeing, share a responsibility for putting in place the right strategies, structures and processes necessary to achieve healthy and productive ageing throughout life. The Alliance therefore also acts as a platform where these "co-responsible players," - experts, decision-makers, and corporate representatives - can share best practices and enter into debate.

In the Alliance's view, actions toward maximising the opportunity presented by longevity need to start when we are born, continue through childhood and progress right into adult life. This method is the 'life-course' approach, and by helping decision-makers act on that principle we believe we can secure the prosperity of European economies and help our children make the most of their longer lives.

The Demographic Challenge – an unprecedented opportunity for Europe

Demographic changes are leading people to live longer healthier lives. In fact, according to the EU's Green Paper on Demographic Change², by 2030, the number of older workers (aged 55 to 64) will have risen by 24 million and the EU will have 34.7 million citizens aged over 80 (compared to 18.8 million today). The number of people 80 or older will increase by 180% by 2050. According to Sally Greengross, Co-chair of the Alliance, the benefits of this shift in demographics "are manifold [because] innovation flourishes when knowledge, skills, energy and experience interact". (People Management, 2006).

The recent "*Healthy ageing: keystone for a sustainable Europe*" Discussion Paper produced by DG-SANCO, DG-EMPL and DG-ECFIN states: "If health can be improved, there is great potential for achieving the two aims of reducing pressure on health and social care systems and increasing economic prosperity". Of great importance is the positive relationship between health and the economy: A healthy society aids in the development of a prosperous economy and a strong economy increases the likelihood of keeping people healthy. Furthermore, a healthy society helps to reduce the strain on the health and social care systems of a nation as fewer people require health care. Indeed, the Alliance for Health &

¹ A group of not for profit, non-partisan organisations devoted to research into population ageing established in 1990. These are led by co-chairs Professor Robert Butler, Professor Françoise Forette, and Baroness Sally Greengross.

² *Communication from the Commission: Green Paper "Confronting Demographic Change: A New Solidarity Between the Generations"*. European Commission. 2006.

the Future's colloquium, *Do Health and Longevity Create Wealth?* brought together scholars in economics and public health who argue that increased longevity, if coupled with good health, may lead to an increase in productivity and growth of GDP. As Dr. Francoise Forette, Co-Chair of the Alliance for Health & the Future, put it, "It is clear that tomorrow's world will be older, but if we work at it, tomorrow's world can also be healthy and wealthy."

A key starting point in improving the economy is maximising productivity among people by ensuring health at the individual level. As stated in the EU Commission's publication, *The Contribution of Health to the Economy in the European Union*, a healthy individual is more likely to do better at school, work longer hours and later into life, and be more productive at work. An investment in health that works to increase the productivity of its citizens also links closely to the European Union's Lisbon Agenda which focuses on making the European economy more competitive worldwide.

The European Union can play a positive role in contributing to the health of its citizens

Improving health and health care in Europe is important for everyone. Member States have the prime responsibility for overseeing the health of their citizens. However, as the European Commission has itself stated, "there are health issues, notably those with a cross-border or international dimension, such as prevention of the spread of communicable disease and the consequences of movement of people, services or goods, where Member States cannot act alone effectively and where co-operative action needs to be taken at an EU level" (EU Commission, 2006). There are many ways that the EU institutions can encourage positive changes within the Member States (e.g. the Open Method of Coordination, Health in all Policies, etc.). Specifically, the Alliance believes that there are three areas in which the EU is uniquely positioned to provide valuable resources to its Member States:

Measurement

The EU is well placed to develop sources of data on key health measures enabling in depth research to identify and quantify both issues and also sources of best practice. However, the challenges that the Alliance has faced gathering the appropriate data have made clear to us the importance of addressing this need more fully. In *Building a Database for Health Policy*, an Alliance publication by Muller and Gusmano, they argue that 'standardisation of international indicator research is essential in the current era of concern for health throughout life.' The Alliance is also playing its part by developing its own indicators relating to the duration of life spent both healthy and active in the economy.

Platforms

By building organised platforms based on goals and principles which the EU supports, attention and credibility are brought to important issues. As a common agent acting across Member States, the EU can bring together stakeholders and encourage Member States to agree to similar objectives with the aim of profoundly improving the overall health of the European population.

Innovation

The EU plays a critical role by actively encouraging innovation through funding for research, particularly those projects that explore best practice across Europe or allow for pilot projects in different settings.

Listed below are specific examples of how these tools can be applied to achieve a healthier and more active society.

Metrics are a critical enabler

Accurate metrics are a critical enabler of effective health strategy for three reasons:

- Before changes happen, we must know where we are.
- For us to learn from each other, we must identify best practice.
- For us to know that we are being effective, we must measure the impact of our actions.

Defining health indicators and providing data on such indicators is a vital starting point for making changes. According to *Healthy Ageing: Keystone for a Sustainable Europe*, “If we are to increase the number of healthy life years of the population, we must have a means to measure successful outcomes, both in terms of collectable data to give comparisons between Member States, but also good quality research to identify best practice”. The European Union is well placed to collect such pan-European data. For example, the Healthy Life Years Indicator is a useful measure as included in the Lisbon strategy. However, the Alliance for Health and the Future is currently developing a Healthy and Active Life Years Indicator as a means of better measuring the years in which an individual is actively contributing to the economy.

Only after such work is accomplished will stakeholders be in a position to make evidence-based recommendations regarding policies and other efforts that are designed to promote health. In addition to testing for effectiveness, such measurements will also help us to identify best practice and to learn from one another.

In order to maximise the impact of gathering data, it is important that there are clear plans for how to best use the findings. This includes developing platforms to address the findings of the statistical analyses.

Recommendations:

- Continue to define indicators, collect health data, provide statistical analysis, and regularly report on health status.
- Perform an audit of indicators to determine what has been put in place and what is still needed.
- Create platforms to examine implications and develop plans for addressing them.
- Encourage Member States to adopt common indicators, such as new indicators on health and active ageing.
- Encourage research network initiatives such the Survey for Healthy Ageing Retirement in Europe (SHARE).

Improving European citizens' health requires a multi-factorial approach, involving individuals, employers, people working in health care, other players and policy makers

The Alliance believes that everyone has a shared responsibility to make health a priority. Based on this principle of co-responsibility of all players, the health of citizens across Europe can only be achieved when all stakeholders make their individual as well as collective contributions. The ways in which the EU can and should work with these different stakeholders are elaborated below:

Individuals

Ultimately, one's behaviour cannot be changed by external factors alone. The individual must understand what may cause his or her health to decline and improve as well as be willing to make behaviour changes based on that knowledge.

According to *The Role of Health Literacy*, an Alliance publication by Wait et al., "health literacy is the ability to make sound health decisions in the context of every day life – at home, in the community, at the workplace, in the health care system, the market place and the political arena. It is a critical empowerment strategy to increase people's control over their health, their ability to seek out information and their ability to take responsibility". An individual cannot make positive changes if they are not health literate or, in other words, if they do not have the skills needed to make critical decisions about their health. The Alliance has also contributed to information about health. As Alliance Co-Chair Dr. Robert N. Butler said, 'it is with this in mind that the Alliance for Health & the Future has drawn up 'health guidelines' for every stage of life to help people develop more healthy lifestyles for the future.'

Poor health literacy is a deficiency that may result in negative consequences for the individual, the health care system and society as a whole. The cost of these consequences were analysed in the United States and, according to one study, low health literacy costs the United States economy up to \$73 billion per year (American Medical Association, 2003). There are many drivers for these increased costs. For example, according to *The Role of Health Literacy*, the American Medical Association and other studies have found that people with low health literacy:

- Are more likely to use emergency services
- Are more likely to be hospitalised
- Are less likely to be compliant with medicines
- Are less likely to use preventative services
- Incur higher health costs

Improving health literacy among Europeans should be tackled using the life-course approach reflecting the fact that individuals can take active measures to maintain their health at every stage of their lives. However, helping an individual to be health literate is not sufficient on its own. Too often, people know what they should do to improve their health; however, they do not always translate this knowledge into sustained efforts to make positive changes. It is therefore also imperative that an effort toward promoting behaviour changes and understanding best practice to achieve these changes be made a priority.

Recommendations:

- Recognize that access to health literacy is a universal right just as there is a universal right of access to health care.
- Develop a research and network agenda on health literacy in the EU, where appropriate linked into the Framework Programme 7.
- Move from a discussion of health information to health literacy and recognise the role of governments, the EU and all co-responsible players in fostering health literacy – encouraging employers, healthcare professionals to play their role in encouraging health literacy.
- Raise health literacy on the political agenda and designate advocates within the political process.
- Provide supportive programmes and policies that foster an improvement in health literacy among all.
- Invest in health literacy by creating a European Centre of Excellence on Health Literacy.
- Encourage integration of health literacy into school curricula from a young age.
- Invest in research on ways of facilitating health behaviour change and of understanding what works in terms of health promotion efforts across different groups in the population.

Employers

Employers play a role in creating a healthy work environment through helping people find a work-life balance and creating environments that are conducive to health at work. As a result, they have the ability to positively or negatively influence their employees' health.

The health of employees should be particularly important to an organisation because it affects their productivity. According to Suhrcke et al., poor health is a leading cause of inefficiency in the workplace, absenteeism and early retirement, all of which have negative effects on business. The Alliance is currently working on an initiative to examine the return of investment for companies supporting health initiatives with their workforce, building on existing work in the US which demonstrates that there is a positive return to making such interventions. Ultimately, it would be valuable if the EU could actively engage and promote companies making such investments.

Recommendations:

- Collaborate with employers to empower workers with information about active health management in the workplace.
- Reward and recognise companies that take active steps to promote health amongst their employees.
- Create policies that foster health and safety in the workplace.
- Encourage employers to encourage employees to be screened for various illnesses.

People working in health care

As the population progressively becomes older, the focus of health care needs to evolve to match the population's changing needs. In particular, the time has come for Europe to shift the emphasis from an essentially defensive approach that addresses 'ill' health, towards a more confident and forward-looking approach that actively promotes 'good' health. We call on the EU to facilitate a deeper understanding among governments of the need to communicate the importance of pursuing good health and preventing disease to people much earlier, as some of the conditions predominantly found in later life can be addressed during childhood.

In addition, sufficient physicians and other health and social care workers who specialize in geriatrics and in other disciplines specific to older people are needed if we are to encourage 'healthy ageing' within our health care systems. The availability of health care providers who understand the needs of older patients will lead to an improvement in care as well as a decrease in health care expenditures.

According to *Promoting Age Equality in the Delivery of Health care* by Dr. Suzanne Wait, it is commonly assumed that, as someone ages, he or she naturally will incur more health costs. However, this perception is inaccurate. In reality, as Dr. James Fries explains in *Compression of Morbidity*, it is morbidity and proximity to mortality, rather than age, that predicts an increase in health care expenditure.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that all health and social care workers receive better training to accommodate factors such as comorbidity (when two or more unrelated pathological or psychological conditions exist simultaneously) and chronicity of conditions in their treatment of older patients.
- Critically assess the appropriateness of specialist services for older people and the impact on the quality of care received in an effort to keep people independent and at home for as long as possible.
- Insert greater flexibility into service provision, not assuming that all older people want the same thing.
- Encourage the development of geriatrics and sub-specializations (e.g. psycho-geriatrics) as specialties.
- Look at ways to set guidelines for people working in health care to play a more active role in prevention.

The EU can also play a positive role in supporting Member States' efforts to effectively fund Health care

Healthy Ageing: Keystone for a Sustainable Europe describes making health and health care a financial priority as a "culture of investment" and points out that "carefully monitored health investments are... a necessary tool to ensure sustainable public finances". Whilst the EU does not play a direct role in funding health care, it can provide support to the Member States in a number of ways. For example, a critical source of funding is to maximise the productivity and economic contribution of the population for longer than is currently the case.

The legislation that the EU has put in place to combat Age Discrimination and its efforts in areas such as e-inclusion, while not health related, are important contributors to enabling the European economy to support the wellbeing of the older population. By encouraging policies and practices that reduce ageism in the workplace, older people are more likely to continue being productive, thus, contributing to the economy while enhancing their personal prosperity. In other words, just as “health should be considered in all policies”, many policies not directly related to health have an impact on health and wellbeing.

In addition, in order to invest effectively in health and health care we must consider the best ways to optimise the allocation of resources. For example, the Alliance is currently working on research that examines possible ways to maximize investment in health, such as looking at the value of increasing focus on and investment in primary care to reduce costly avoidable hospitalizations.

Recommendations:

- Foster increased employment through anti-discrimination laws and promoting literacy and technology training.
- Help ensure financial security of citizens through sharing best practice considerations of how to fund older age.
- Set up a platform to allow Member States to explore innovative sources of funding.
- Support research into optimising provision of health care.
- Develop platforms to share best practices.
- Encourage Member States to be flexible about retirement age.
- Play a more active role in prevention.

The Alliance would welcome an opportunity to share its extensive expertise and research in greater depth and to provide further input as the EU's strategy is defined and implemented. Please contact Julia Levy, Executive Director of the Alliance if you would like any further information on +44.20.7820.7544 or julia.levy@healthandfuture.org.

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