

EHFG community response to the mission letter for Commissioner-designate for Health and Animal Welfare

Participants at the 27th [European Health Forum Gastein](#) (EHFG), in September 2024, discussed some of the greatest challenges facing the people of Europe, under the theme “Shifting sands of health – Democracy, demographics, digitalisation”. The Forum was the culmination of a year-long process in which the European public health community discussed health priorities for the European Commission’s new mandate.

The EHFG community, representing stakeholders from the public sector, private sector, science and academia, and civil society, expressed its support for the mission letter from the Commission President to the Commissioner-designate for Health and Animal Welfare, Olivér Várhelyi and called on the European Union (EU) to make full use of its existing legal and policy powers to implement effective responses to threats to the health and well-being of people living in the EU. In particular, the scope for measures included harmonisation in the internal market, social, environmental and agricultural policies, and the common commercial policy.

Key areas for more effective use of EU legal and policy instruments to enhance health and drive social and economic progress in the EU:

Since the Commission’s last mandate, there has been a rapid increase in awareness of the importance of the **commercial determinants of health**, especially those that increase the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The EU plays a key role in shaping trade and consumer protection policies across Member States and, increasingly, beyond, giving it many opportunities to safeguard the health of its populations. This growing awareness of both the burden of disease attributable to commercial actors, coupled with a greater understanding of how they undermine health, calls for a renewed attention to ways in which legislation and policy measures can be used. It should be consistent with the concept of proportionality in areas like trade policy, taxation, and food production and pay particular attention to growing concerns about ultra-processed foods. Measures incorporating the precautionary principle into scientific evidence should be implemented, while recognising how that evidence is often shaped by the interests of producers. Other measures include progress on alcohol and food labelling, finalising the directive on tobacco taxation, and strengthening the ability of Member States, especially the smaller ones, to counter actions by producers of harmful products. The EU and its institutions must, at all times, commit to its Treaty obligation to ensure that a high level of health is part of all its policies, and this means confronting those who threaten these policies.

Tackling entrenched health inequities requires providing fair access to healthcare and medicines. Concluding the pharmaceutical regulation and continued work on the Critical Medicines Act will contribute to better and more **equitable health**. An opportunity to make rapid headway across Member States is to put a focus on disparities within and between European countries. Independent of their size and GDP, the EU has the competence to ensure that high-priced innovative medicines are available at the same time and for an affordable price in all European countries. A true achievement of health

equity requires ensuring that every individual has **fair access** not only to healthcare and medicines but also to education, housing, and healthy food.

The **digital transformation** is gathering pace and, used appropriately, can reduce preventable health differences in Europe. However, this will only happen if technological advances are accompanied by measures to close the digital divides across and within countries that create disparities in accessing information and services. This highlights the need to **implement the European Health Data Space (EHDS)**, also recognising the potential of data to inform health policy and practice. However, this will be contentious, and it will therefore be essential to strike a balance between patients' right to privacy and the benefits that can flow to them from enhanced secondary use of data for regulatory, research, and innovation purposes. Remaining in the digital sphere, it will also be important to tackle the harmful and addictive use of social media, and especially its impact on children's mental health and well-being.

To complete a true European Health Union requires a strategic long-term "health-for-all-policies" approach (health enabling the attainment of other SDGs) with implementation of synergistic initiatives at local, regional, national, and EU levels. **Social participation** across generations, for example in Youth Policy Dialogues, provides an opportunity to advance a European Health Union that responds to the needs of its people. However, this will only happen if there is political will and leadership, ensuring that policies in all sectors prioritise health. This demands a whole-of-society approach – including civil society organisations, science and academia, the private sector, and actors from other sectors, with local and national public bodies collaborating to jointly achieve a true European Health Union.

Sincerely,



Dr Clemens Martin Auer

President of the European Health Forum Gastein

On behalf of the EHFG community, representing European stakeholders from the public sector, private sector, civil society, and science & academia