European Health Union: Council Calls on Commission to Keep Health as a Priority

The Council is calling on the European Commission to **keep health as a priority** in its upcoming five-year term. In conclusions approved today, member states acknowledge the work already carried out to improve health policy coordination at EU level, highlight the ongoing challenges facing the EU's health system, and set out the **key areas of focus for strengthening the European Health Union** .

European health systems are set to face ten difficult years, with the growing needs of an ageing population, rising chronic diseases, shortages of medicines and medical devices, and retiring health workers straining our resources. The climate crisis and the rise of artificial intelligence further complicate the situation. To manage these challenges, Europe must step up. Over the past half year, EU health ministers have outlined an ambitious programme, aiming to reshape the European Health Union and ensure resilient, high-quality healthcare in all member states.

Frank Vandenbroucke, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health and Social Affairs

Tacking Ongoing Challenges

In its conclusions, the Council notes that the EU's health system faces significant challenges. These include **health workforce shortages**, which member states and the Commission are encouraged to address through investment, digital tools, knowledge sharing, cooperation at EU level and adapted regulatory frameworks.

Another key challenge is improving the **security of supply** of medicines and medical devices. The Council calls on member states and the Commission to continue work on mitigating shortages of critical medicines, including via the Critical Medicines Alliance, and invites the Commission to consider proposing a critical medicines act, which would provide a legal framework for addressing supply-chain vulnerabilities.

Addressing Priority Needs

The Council notes that **priority needs in healthcare** should be addressed. Setting up an independent, needs-evidenced database can help to identify unmet health-related patient and societal needs. As next steps, the establishment of a voluntary, member-state driven mechanism for evaluating and prioritising such needs and the EU level coordination of public support to address the most pressing health-related unmet needs could be considered.

The Council also calls on member states and the Commission to strengthen action in priority areas by **improving the EU's implementation tools**, including EU4Health, and developing new ones such as an EU health investment hub.

Disease Prevention

The Council's conclusions also point to areas where further action needs to be taken. These include **prevention of non-communicable diseases**, which are responsible for nearly 90% of all deaths in the EU. The Council calls on member states and the Commission to promote healthy lifestyles and environments, including through adopting the legislative proposals announced under Europe's Beating Cancer plan and strengthening the work on the 'Healthier Together' initiative.

Likewise, action in the area of **preparedness and communicable diseases** should include keeping cross-border health threats high on the EU's agenda, strengthening the fight against mis- and disinformation, and improving security of supply of relevant medicines and medical devices.

Background

In a communication published in November 2020, the European Commission announced the establishment of a European Health Union (EHU). The aim of the EHU is to facilitate closer cooperation among member states at EU level on matters relating to health care, including:

- a collective response to health crises at EU level
- available, affordable and innovative medical supplies
- better prevention, treatment and aftercare for diseases such as cancer

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