

## Event Summary

### European Parliament Interest Group on Innovation in Health & Social Care meeting

#### Integration of health and social care to tackle disease outbreaks

Hosted by MEP Tomislav Sokol (EPP, Croatia)

26 January 2021

*[When faced with the current pandemic] Members States who lagged in their integration of health of social care [...] had, at the beginning, a higher mortality rate than others — MEP Tomislav Sokol*

The virtual meeting of the European Parliament's Interest Group on Innovation in Health and Social Care entitled '**Integration of health and social care to tackle disease outbreaks**' took place on Tuesday, 26 January 2021 via videoconference. The meeting intended to gather EU policymakers, academia, and representatives from healthcare associations and patients' groups to deliberate how to improve European Health Systems to make it truly patient-centred, specifically to strengthen the capability of the Union for prevention and preparedness to tackle future disease outbreaks. The meeting aimed at formulating concrete recommendations to be able to provide meaningful support in the development of the EU4HEALTH programme.

The virtual table was opened by HFE President **Roberto Bertollini**, who emphasised the cruciality of the meeting. Although the current pandemic has started to be mitigated with the arrival of several vaccines, we should step back a minute and think about how future disease outbreaks and challenges can be addressed and controlled, he said. He stressed the blows that the pandemic has struck against society and how vital it is to put prevention at the heart of the European Health Systems through the use of technology and the interpretation of biological and medical signals as well as intervening early based on the precautionary principle. He highlighted his encouragement after the publication of the Expert Panel Opinion of the organisation of resilient health and social care following the Covid-19 pandemic and emphasised that frequent pan European exercises should be carried out to ensure once again that the word resilience becomes a reality rather than an empty popular slogan.

The discussion was hosted by **MEP Tomislav Sokol** (EPP, Croatia), who stressed the good timing of the meeting and how it is very connected to the concrete problems and issues that we currently face. He stressed that the European response to the current pandemic was rather slow and that the current public perception of the European response is also negative. He stressed that the issue was not the European response itself, but the lack of a coherent European response due to the national competencies in the area of health. He further highlighted that the link between health and social care is crucial as countries that lacked more in their integration had a higher mortality rate and how important primary care was to prevent future disease outbreaks due to its being the first point of contact in terms of epidemiological measures. MEP Sokol argued that the EU could provide added value thanks to its ability to act, for instance by implementing exchanges and mandating interoperability of health data at the European level, as well as its ability to invest in the European workforce and in terms of making European health systems more cohesive throughout Europe.

The first part of the meeting focused on the causality of the impact of the current pandemic on the collapse in primary care services for long-term conditions and how much impact could be reversed. The discussion was led by **Diederik Aarendonk**, Forum Coordinator of the European Forum for Primary Care, who described the impact in exacerbating health disparities in the continent, especially in that it impacted those already vulnerable more than those who weren't. He added that the pandemic widened the educational gap and led to higher stress levels for such groups but also led to the postponement of healthcare and services. He noted that the pandemic can be a 'game-changer' for primary care services

if there are investments to implement integrated, horizontal, community-based primary health-care systems and investment in the workforce as well as to create a new organisational and financial model based on the integration of health and social care.

The meeting then moved on to a discussion of the policy actions needed to help integrate health and social care to reduce the risk of disease outbreak. **Neda Milevska**, Board Vice-Chair of the International Alliance of Patients' Organisations and Vice-President of Health First Europe, said the current pandemic has shown that health should be a priority and that patients should be at the centre of the health system. She highlighted that primary care services are at the frontline of every long-term condition and need support from the healthcare system and the society at large, including with digital solutions. She noted the role that patients can play in treating disease outbreaks both as a partner in shared decision-making or a co-creator in evidence-based solutions as well as a co-designer of holistic public health approaches.

The third speaker of the meeting was **Anu Söderström**, President of Occupational Therapy Europe, who described what occupational therapy can offer to the EU for Health Programme, specifically in terms of strengthening its health systems pillar. She noted that Occupational Therapy enhances the enablement of digital solutions to improve patients' access to services, providing an example of how it can help those who live in remote areas through teletherapy. She highlighted that occupational therapy has a high client satisfaction, is cost-effective, and increases social participation, though she also noted that there is an unequal availability to such services. Finally, she stressed that there is a need to increase the digital skills of health professionals and patients, as well as increase patient access to tele-health solutions.

The last contribution was made by **Professor Pedro Pita Barros**, Member of the European Commission Expert Panel, on effective ways of investing in health. He presented the recently published Expert Panel [Opinion](#) and how the Expert Group got its inspiration from existing approaches to the resilience of health systems. He noted that there are a number of shared concerns when talking about the resilience of health systems towards shocks, namely: their ability to look ahead, to absorb shocks and to adapt to them and their aptitude to learn from them. He added that there are some elements common to most countries: vulnerable groups were most affected by the pandemic. Non-Covid-19 care patients were harmed due to resources diverted to COVID-19 patients, and that will be pressure on mental health issues in the long-term. He stressed that there is a need to anticipate future disease outbreaks, be 'prepared to prepare' a response' and adapt at short notice through the redesign of patient' paths inside organisations and through telemedicine. He highlighted that there is a need to invest in training and resilience of the health workforce, ensure relevant data flows in a timely and organised way and pilot the resilience test toolkit provided by the Expert Panel Opinion.

In the ensuing debate, panellists agreed that:

- social care, though not covered in the Expert Panel Opinion due to its focus on health systems, is crucial to tackling disease outbreaks.
- when utilising digital tools, data security is also another primordial issue that needs to be tackled.
- further resources should be provided for primary care workers as well as further training for healthcare workers to collaborate internationally; and that
- a multi-faceted approach is needed to put prevention at the centre of European health systems and tackle future disease outbreaks.

You are able to access all speaker presentations here:

- [Prof. Dr. Pedro Pita Barros](#)
- [Diederik Aarendonk](#)
- [Neda Milevska](#)
- [Anu Söderström](#)