



FOR A PROGRESSIVE HEALTH AGENDA
Declaration of PES Health Ministers – 12/03/2018 - Brussels

We, Health Ministers of the Party of European Socialists, call on all progressive forces in the European Union to act together and provide the highest public health standards for all Europeans.

We believe in the **social-democratic values** of democracy and the rule of Law, of collective answers and public policies to ensure equality of conditions and access to fundamental human needs. We believe in social justice, in Human Rights, in gender equality, in human dignity and access to decent living conditions, as well as in individual emancipation.

We want to transform societies for the benefit of the largest number of Europeans. We consider that the intervention, regulation and redistribution of wealth organised by Member States and public authorities is necessary to counter the imbalances of the market and to ensure the convergence of living standards.

We believe in social progress which helps to achieve a high quality of life for every individual and we trust in the future individual and collective development to fight against poverty, oppression, prejudice and obscurantism.

We believe the protection and preservation of health is at the core of social-democratic values. Properly implemented evidence-based societal public health measures, as well as resilient and sustainable health care systems are a precondition for the EU to guarantee healthy living, healthy ageing and be active, productive and inclusive in labour market.

Health is a value in itself, which must be respected in all EU policies. Health is a comprehensive concept. Health – the state of complete mental, physical and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity – is a fundamental aspect of everyone's life. **A high level of health protection and timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality are essential to the well-being of every society.** Based on the overarching values and principles of universality, access to good quality care, equity and solidarity, health systems are a central part of Europe's high level of social protection and make a major contribution to social cohesion and social justice. No community can exist in prosperity without a strong public commitment to guaranteeing healthy labour and high living standards, promoting healthy lifestyles, preventing diseases, enabling patient-centeredness and patient involvement as well as protecting people's lives. And we, Europeans, can be particularly proud of the models of public health and healthcare systems developed in our countries. We must make sure these values and principles remain a reality in all the health systems of the EU.



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We welcome the fact that the Commission **underlines the importance of timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality** as one of 20 principles in the political commitment *Recommendation for a European Pillar of Social Rights*. As enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, "A high level of human protection be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities". We call for action at the EU level and between Member States where there is a clear EU-added value to improve the condition of public health and healthcare systems in the long-term.

The right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality are values embraced by European Socialists. Although we acknowledge that health services and medical care and cure are mainly falling within the competence of Member States, we encourage voluntary cooperation between Member States, with the support of the EU, whilst ensuring that the EU's actions fully respect the responsibilities of Member States for the definition of their health policy, organisation and delivery of health services and medical care as well as for the allocation of the resources assigned to them.

As progressives, we believe that it is particularly important to tackle the social, cultural, behavioural, economic and environmental determinants of health. Our health agenda should aim at contributing to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including: zero hunger, no poverty and healthy living for all, universal health coverage of all ages. We should aim to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to attain the same level of health and well-being and support Member States in reaching the goals.

Our first priority must be to reduce health inequalities. Social inequalities in health in the EU persist. Inequalities in health start with poverty, which means the poorer have less chances for a good state of mental, physical and social health – and more suffering. This is why we should first and foremost ensure proper healthy living conditions, notably at the working and living places and in the environment, and access to prevention. Special attention should be paid for children and adolescent's access to prevention and to timely medical treatments. In addition, people in economic hardship are also, when they are sick, 10 times more likely to have problems in gaining access to proper healthcare than more affluent people. The proportion of people in the lowest income group who cannot afford healthcare increased substantially between 2008 and 2014. Social inequalities in health exist because of inequalities in the conditions of daily life and the fundamental drivers that give rise to them: inequities in power, money and resources. This is why we call on the EU and Member States to give absolute priority to the fight against all forms of social inequality, for the benefit of our citizens' health. Healthy choice must be the easy choice in every area of people's activities, including nutrition, physical activity, labour and education conditions.

To reduce inequalities, we need indeed to pursue this goal throughout all our actions: by promoting adequate nutrition for children at risk of poverty, addressing health determinants such as unhealthy eating habits, alcohol misuse or tobacco which have a strong social gradient, and by promoting universal access to affordable healthcare at socially acceptable prices.



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Secondly, we believe that public, affordable, sustainable and preventive systems of public health and healthcare are best equipped to deliver highest possible results for our citizens. Cuts to public services during the last ‘austerity decade’ in many Member States have exposed vulnerable social groups to even greater health risks. We need to reverse this negative trend. We need to protect our public services and help them deliver highest quality services at affordable cost to all citizens, regardless of their material status. At the same time, we need to support progressive investment in health as a crucial asset to stimulate growth, jobs and a social-oriented economy. We need to highlight the economic dimension of the health sector: it drives innovation, provides jobs to highly qualified people, and generates growth. Investing in health pays off and needs to be calculated as an element of our macro-economy policies.

We should improve patients' access to medicines to help ensure all patients have timely access to innovative, high quality and affordable medicines everywhere in the EU. Universal access - not only to medical treatment but also to preventive care and cure, in particular broad cancer screening programmes - is crucial. This should include health promotion and disease prevention. We need to stress the economic benefits of promoting good health to keep people healthy as they grow older. This leads to increased labour participation and to a reduction of premature, amenable and avoidable deaths and social costs. To preserve our European social model and social cohesion for future generations, we have the huge responsibility of making our health systems more effective, accessible and resilient.

These broad priorities are the backbone of our progressive health agenda. They need to be reflected in all our social policies, not only those directly addressing health issues. We want to act together to bring about a positive change for our societies. For this to happen, we need to be particularly active in the following areas:

- **Promoting the ‘health in all policies’ principle at EU and Member State levels. Agriculture, education, sport, marketing, urban planning, research, work place: all must play a part in creating healthier environments.** The individual’s health depends on a sum of factors which are vastly influenced by public policies. We need to systematically approach health in a holistic way and make sure that public health effects are accounted for in new legislation at all levels and in all areas of policy-making. Social, economic, behavioural, cultural and environmental determinants of ill-health and health inequalities need to be explicitly tackled. In common EU Single Market, a lot of risk factors affect European’s health by reducing our health resources, provoking different disorders and stimulating a growing number of chronic diseases. The only feasible way to combat such a massive threat in the area of public health is by implementing a policy mix, through population-level interventions, including taxation, marketing, advertisement restrictions, education. These population-level interventions must of course be based on science, on testing and on evidence gathering.
- **Ensuring better access to medicines and health technologies by supporting fair and transparent drug pricing policies.** Access to medicines is an essential part of a



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modern healthcare system, and equitable access is necessary to ensure equity in care and in health. In recent decades, prices of new medicines have become a real obstacle to the needed treatment for many patients and they threaten the sustainability of health budgets. We have to review the pharmaceutical system to address the shortages of essential medicines, to move towards patient-driven research, and to improve transparency of research data and costs. We strongly advocate in favour of the introduction of a permanent health technology assessment mechanism at the EU level. Voluntary cooperation initiatives among Member States aiming to facilitate access to medicines can be of added value in this regard and should be encouraged.

- **Implementing a European Guarantee for children and youth.** More than 25% of children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. We strongly support the PES European Youth Plan that calls for the establishment of a European Child Guarantee to provide all children at risk of poverty with adequate nutrition, free child- and healthcare, and decent housing conditions. At the same time, we need concerted efforts to combat the rise of childhood obesity and overweight which is a major health challenge that widens health inequalities in Europe.
- **Bringing an end to communicable diseases.** Over 5 million people in the EU suffer from hepatitis C. Over 800 000 people need life-long treatment for HIV/AIDS, and 30,000 people become infected every year. The latest figures show increases in HIV across the all over Europe: from Cyprus and Malta to Germany, Ireland, or Lithuania. HIV, TB and Hepatitis are closely related - hence the sustainable development target on addressing the three diseases together - and we must act more strongly on reaching out to vulnerable people, for example by decriminalising and de-stigmatising drug consumption. To succeed in combating this alarming trend, we need to combine health instruments with social instruments and work together across health, social, and education policies.
- **Supporting citizens' empowerment and measures to prevent chronic diseases and address mental health.** We must create the conditions to ensure that the healthy choice is the easy choice, for instance by ensuring that healthy food and sports facilities are accessible and affordable to everybody. We also need greater efforts on citizens' empowerment, to enable citizens to monitor their own health.
- **Improving access to vaccination for all children.** In the fight against communicable diseases, improving vaccination coverage is a particularly important priority. It is unacceptable that children in Europe are dying of measles because they are not vaccinated, and that more and more people are dying of seasonal influenza. A common work is crucial to ensure that vaccination programmes are effective and that a high vaccination coverage is reached.
- **Harnessing digital innovation to support health policy goals and citizens' empowerment.** The digitalisation of our society brings new challenges but also opportunities for the health sector. Technological innovation is a tool that can make the lives of people, companies and governments easier. In the same way, the free



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movement of data concerns all European policies and fundamental freedoms. More particularly as regards the sensitive category of health data, we need to find ways to use those data in a secure way and in the interest of our individual and collective benefit. Innovation in healthcare through better use of data and digital technologies should support the overall health policy goals so that people would be healthier and that the health system would be sustainable, citizen-centred and transparent. **We also support strongly the recently launched European Reference Networks** which will facilitate the access of patients with rare or low prevalence complex diseases to highly specialised care. We need to make sure that the networks bring benefits to patients.

- **Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.** To ensure fundamental rights of women to sexual and reproductive health are respected we must in the first-place fight against sexual and gender-based violence, and promote women's, children's, and adolescent's access to health and healthcare. Apart from harming women's rights, restrictions to women's rights also have grave repercussions for programmes combating HIV, and those promoting mental and child health. We call on all progressives to take a firm stance that these rights must be respected without exception.
- **Tackling at EU level the main risk factors of preventable diseases, such as smoking, the lack of physical activity, unbalanced diets, for instance due to excess intake of sugar or trans-fats, as to unbalanced diets and nutrition policy, we must progress much further in the area of the reformulation of food products.** By contributing to remove excess sugars, salt and fat from the products that are bought every day by European consumers, we are providing real value to citizens. We believe that food reformulation can help Europeans to adopt healthier diets and get closer to the recommended intake levels of nutrients. We should be very attentive and ensure that companies selling food products in the EU and beyond are really delivering on the implementation of their targets
- **Tackling at EU level another specific main risk factors of preventable diseases, such as the harmful use of alcohol.** Europe is the heaviest drinking region of the world with the average consumption level almost twice as high as a world average. The harm caused by alcohol is also the highest in the world, whether as alcohol-related health conditions, or as a cost to society caused by crime, violence, reduced ability to work, or harm to children and families. There is a growing demand for coordination and cooperation on the issues of alcohol and health as several problems are not easily solved at a national level. Most of the effective tools to reduce alcohol consumption are in the hands of the Member States. However, Member States' efforts to introduce measures to protect public health can be diluted by exposure to cross-border advertising, including on-line advertising, and cross-border trade, including on-line sales. Therefore, we call on enhanced cooperation of the EU and Member States especially with regard to cross-border advertising, labelling and trading of alcoholic beverages. We need a health dimension in all policies, engaging other ministerial councils, to defend health concerns.



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We must be the forces of progress and continue to convey positive messages. We should ensure that teenagers, young adults from all social groups as well as our senior citizens have the means to make healthy choices.

We must think broadly in relation to public health issues and look for the most effective ways forward. Unhealthy eating habits, lack of exercise, tobacco, alcohol misuse, stress, and wider factors such as unhealthy housing or working conditions are making our healthy citizens sick and put a huge pressure on our healthcare systems. On tobacco specifically, we must focus on the full implementation of the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control as this also constitutes a SDG target. We call all Member States to urgently ratify the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products.

We are convinced that looking at ways to better manage risk factors cannot be done without the full involvement of the 15-35 years old citizens. We need to make everything possible to help them live in healthy environments and maintain healthy lifestyles.

The ultimate aim of progressive politicians in charge of health is to contribute to significantly prolong the expected healthy lives of our citizens in the coming years. The European Commission aims to increase it by two years by 2020. This is of course a bold objective but we must be working on instruments, resources and coordinated approach to achieve this goal together.



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