

Gastein health forum: The time is right for real health policy outcomes

Written by Clemens Martin Auer on 28 September 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

Gastein provides the perfect platform to drive the conversation and bear fruit to real health policy outcomes, says Clemens Martin Auer.



Clemens Martin Auer | *Photo credit: Health forum Gastein*

Over the past year, I have had the privilege to participate in a number of national, regional and international meetings and conferences. The OECD Ministerial meeting in Paris, the World Health Assembly in Geneva, the Fair Pricing Forum in The Netherlands, the informal meeting of health ministers in Tallinn, have all given me a very good overview of what policymakers across Europe believe are the current and upcoming challenges for our healthcare systems.

As I take up my new role as President of the European Health Forum Gastein, the insights I have

gleaned from these discussions confirm that this year's Forum is timely: it provides the urgently needed opportunity to take a step back for in-depth discussions on the state of health in Europe and its future.

As our health systems face greater demands and higher costs, an important concern for patients, healthcare practitioners and policymakers is whether costs can be contained while sustaining the quality of healthcare services.

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Access to medicines, health inequalities, pricing and reimbursement, and the value of innovation are some of the crucial elements that must be debated and considered within national health plans.

But the conversation doesn't stop here. If we are to truly accomplish universal access to quality care, it is imperative that we look beyond the healthcare sector and integrate it with other policy areas.

It is this aspiration that will form the basis for discussions at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) 2017: Health in All Politics - a better future for Europe.

The EHFG aims to take the concept of Health in All Policies to another level - to that of political processes and implementation. As a long-standing board member of the European Health Forum Gastein and now President, I have witnessed how over the years the EHFG has been a market place for major health policy topics.

Over its 20-year tenure, the EHFG has been stimulated by the lively debates between decision makers from EU member states, the European Commission and many experts from the public and private sectors, civil society, and science and research.

It is now my goal to go a step further and turn the EHFG into a comprehensive policy dialogue, where the many exciting findings will be rooted in the real world of health systems.

I aim to reconcile theory and practice and offer reform-driving decision makers a forum for exchange and encounters. A forum where best analysis meets best practice and where we can all learn from each other.

This year's conference features the EHFG Health Futures project, which has prompted a report outlining three visions for the health of European people for the next 20 years. The report strives to help us consider the policy choices that will need to be made over the coming years, and what different future scenarios will mean for various interest groups.

Will better quality of life, in which healthy behaviours are at the heart of the everyday, be more important than economic growth, as the first scenario suggests? Or is it more likely that governments will set up contracts between state and patient, outlining the patient's responsibility for their personal health?

Perhaps, as depicted in the third scenario, governments resort to health technology and citizens come to the general conclusion that technology is a cure for all ills, rejecting government advice on disease prevention. We cannot know what the future holds, but now is the time to put in place the foundations to shape that future. The EHFG will be a crucial starting point for that discussion.

This year's EHFG will group topics around four tracks: Under the main theme of 'Health in All Politics - a better future for Europe', there will be a track concentrating on Health in All Policies, and another looking into health systems more generally.

Here, I hope to see discussions around the directions of travel that European health systems need to take to become more equal, more inclusive and more sustainable. We must ask ourselves how can we make these issues a shared responsibility beyond the healthcare sector.

Pricing of medicines has proven another contentious subject, which prompted us to explore developments in the areas of legislation and regulation at both EU and member state level in the third track.

I look forward to digging a bit deeper into amending the shortcomings of the current system - where did we go wrong, how can we reach better collaboration between all involved players, and what policy proposals need to be put forward?

Finally, the fourth track covers innovation, big data and ICT, subjects which have been a focus of my work as a policymaker and of great personal interest.

I support an encompassing approach to innovation - not simply focused on the latest technology, but also on tools, concepts and processes that allow health systems to become more flexible and quicker to respond. Adoption of innovation lays the necessary foundations for our health systems to respond to the latest developments for the benefit of the patients.

Health is, for the most part, a competence of EU member states. But as Europe comes face-to-face with social, welfare and demographic challenges, there is an increased need to leverage shared experiences. We need to collaboratively think outside the box and join up the dots when it comes to delivering quality healthcare.

The EHFG provides the perfect platform to drive the conversation and bear fruit to real policy outcomes that cut across the four thematic tracks and beyond. I look forward to welcoming you to the Gastein valley between 4-6 October and setting the scene for the next 20 years of the Forum - and European health policy.

About the author

Clemens Martin Auer is President of European Health Forum Gastein

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