Delegates at the recent EIT Health Summit 2019 had the opportunity to meet innovators and gain insight into why defining societal health needs should be the focus of innovation. Brian Johnson reports.

More than 1,000 delegates attended EIT Health’s 2019 Summit in Paris on December 2-3, to answer the question, “Defining unmet need - how much does it matter?”

The event, held at the Palais Brongniart, brought together some of the world’s leading experts to share invaluable, first-hand insights from the worlds of business, education, research and healthcare.

The Summit explored the regulatory and investment pathways across Europe that could create barriers to market, preventing innovation from coming to market and changing lives.
Regulatory experts discussed their changing role from gatekeepers to enablers, as they have responsibility to create space for innovation to thrive.

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Welcoming participants Professor Alexander von Gabain suggested that most of us probably think we know exactly what innovation is, but, more often than not, constantly mix it up with discovery, invention, and translation.

“Let’s not forget, that true innovation is when it really comes back to the people in the form of products, services or new interactions between the most people which makes them different in life or in our instance, for health care.”

A solution that does not meet a clear, unmet need or address a gap in the market has little chance of navigating the complex path to market. Therefore a shift towards supporting health innovations that truly meet healthcare’s biggest challenges must be reinforced.

"[EIT Health] get ideas delivered, you get investment, you get introduced to new ideas, you get meetings where people talk to each other and create projects, where you find new ways to identify customers’ needs, all focused on health care and other innovative products and services" Alexander von Gabain, Chairman of the EIT Health Supervisory Board

Von Gabain, Chairman of the EIT Health Supervisory Board, suggested that innovation wasn’t a linear process, it was much more complex and more like a network.

“If you develop a single biotech or pharma product you can have up to 400 partners that are involved from beginning to end, in various stages, just to deliver one product.”

He highlighted the key role of entrepreneurs in driving health innovation but raised concerns that unlike the United States, Europe was still struggling to attract investment in innovation, “at a scale which we would like to have. I think this is where we have to do something about."

"So, money is important for innovation but we also need interaction, we need to teach people how to talk to each other. “I think some academics speak a language which, for say, a venture capitalist, is hard to understand. Sometimes you need to add people into the team to help ensure that investors understand what it’s all about.”

Small enterprises, he suggested, “are really the fuel that runs the engine of innovation”. And in parallel, blue chip companies also need similar types of people in their organisations, those that can interpret what small enterprises are doing. And that, he told the audience is where EIT Health and this
year’s EIT Health summit comes in.

“In a Union where we have 28 member states and many different cultural ways of approaching innovation, it’s very important to bring players together to talk to each other and to recognise and identify the problems and challenges which have to be solved.” And that’s where EIT is.

The focus of this year’s event, ‘Defining unmet need – how much does it matter?’, explored the fundamental role of needs-based innovation in generating transformation in the lives of patients and citizens, asking the key question, how do we create innovation that meets the societal needs of today and yet is future-proofed for tomorrow? “We have now been building EIT Health for four years and it’s a fantastic European network with a number of hubs interconnecting all players across borders, bringing people together.”

EIT Health is a network of best-in-class health innovators backed by the EU, delivering solutions to enable European citizens to live longer, healthier lives by promoting innovation.

It connects the right people and the right topics across European borders, so that innovation can happen at the intersection of research, education and business – for the benefit of citizens.

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Professor Elizabeth Teisberg from the Value Institute for Health and Care, a joint endeavour of the Dell Medical School and McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin, delivered the summit’s keynote address on value-based health care.

Teisberg said her passion for transforming health care came about from her own experiences. One of her sons had a congenital heart anomaly, while the other had a chronic disease that was misdiagnosed or mistreated for several years.

"When we’re focused on improving the outcomes for everyone we serve and doing it in a relationship-centred way, we can support both the purpose of health care and the professionalism of the clinicians who spend their life working to that end” Professor Elizabeth Teisberg from the Value Institute for Health and Care, a joint endeavour of the Dell Medical School and McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin

“I was told that one child’s diagnosis was ‘inconsistent with life’, thank goodness that was wrong. My other child meanwhile was in pain every single day for five years."

"But it is amazing how fast the human body heals when you have a correct diagnosis and correct treatment. Both of my sons had medically complex childhoods but today, they’re both healthy young men.”

Everyone has a health care story, she suggested. “If you don’t personally have a story, you have a close friend or relative who does and these are the stories that define for us, our quality of life and dignity of death. So, we can’t ignore them, they’re so compelling to us.”

As a systems engineer, Teisberg said she realised that the first thing she noticed was how many smart, caring, and hardworking professionals there were in the health sector.
“The people are not the problem, they’re just amazingly great, smart people working in this sector. And yet, we have systems that produce wildly variable outcomes, lots of inconsistency, increasing costs in every country and, notoriously slow innovation in health care relative to other sectors of the economy.”

Part of the problem, she recognised, was that people were defining success around cost-shifting or market share, or by budget share or compliance with processes rather than around achieving better outcomes for individuals and families, the people that the health care systems were supposed to be serving.

“And so, much of the discussion about changing and supporting health care, had been going on at the wrong levels, rather than at the level where value is created, where outcomes are improved for individuals and families.”

Improving health outcomes means being more human-centred about solutions and taking a step back to understand the needs that people have, so solutions can be developed to fit those needs.

Health care is like airline travel, suggested Teisberg. “It’s the outcome, it’s the getting to the destination that’s really important, not the experience itself.”

“That doesn’t mean the experience is unimportant; safety, respect, compassion ought to be delivered, but that should not be the aspirational goal.”

“So, if you’re looking to come here to this summit in Paris and we offer you a really inexpensive ticket to Frankfurt, that isn’t the solution you need. So, cost alone is not the goal, if it were, we would have painkillers and compassion and we’d be done. So outcomes really matter.”

When assessing health care outcomes the questions most commonly asked are ‘how were we?’ Or ‘were you satisfied?’

But, argued Teisberg, these are the wrong questions to ask in healthcare because the fundamental question is not ‘How was I?’ It should be ‘How are you?’, ‘Did we help?’, ‘Can you meet the goals that are important to you in your life?’, ‘Can you do the things that are important to you?

"Innovation for innovation’s sake no longer has a place in an ever-changing healthcare landscape. Unmet need must be the core focus of all innovation activity if we are to deliver true transformation to the lives of patients" EIT Health CEO Jan-Philipp Beck'

“Fundamentally, it’s human-focused. And when we’re focused on improving the outcomes for everyone we serve and doing it in a relationship-centred way, we can support both the purpose of health care and the professionalism of the clinicians who spend their life working to that end.”

In a plenary session on the power of outcome transparency, EIT Health CEO Jan-Philipp Beck said, “Innovation for innovation’s sake no longer has a place in an ever-changing healthcare landscape. Unmet need must be the core focus of all innovation activity if we are to deliver true transformation to the lives of patients.”

Beck, in a later media session looking back at the first three years of EIT’s work said that since the network’s first year of operation in 2016, it had made remarkable progress attracting more than €90bn in funding.
“We have helped more than 40 different products and services launch to market and have supported more than 370 companies in Europe with 8,000 professionals and 4,000+ graduates going through our training programmes.”

He presented several examples including Abtrace, a company that was incubated in 2018 following a Europe-wide competition. “We wanted to select a team that would have good ideas on how they could combat anti-microbial resistance.”

“Not through knowledge about the developing of new drugs. But by other approaches at the point of care on how a treatment and clinical decisions can be optimised to reduce the use of antibiotics.”

The Venture Centre of Excellence (VCOE) programme in partnership with the European Investment Fund (EIF) - a first-of-its-kind pan-European programme that aims to accelerate innovation through investment was launched at the summit.

The programme will address the fragmented regulatory and investment landscape across Europe by strengthening the relationships between venture funds, corporate investors and Europe’s most promising life sciences start-ups.

In a session on patient engagement in digital health products, Dr Usman Khan, executive director of the European Patients Forum, said it was important to be able to “walk in the shoes of the patient.”

"[We need] to put patients on the front line and be the drivers of change. It’s patients working with the lab and on medical and assisted devices and new apps and then taking them either to a company or creating their own company to develop them" Yann Le Cam, CEO of EURORDIS

Chairing a lively panel, Khan said that patient empowerment and engagement now is expanding, adding, “It’s about people who want to improve services by being involved. It is about getting patient improvers working on wards, working with clinical teams and to be able to understand how to improve care pathways.”

Also speaking in the session on “patient and citizen involvement from beginning to end,” Borislava Ananieva, a two-time kidney patient, sought to highlight the “young patient perspective.”

Ananieva, president of the European Patients Forum Youth Group, said, “It is important to include not only patients in the development of medical technologies and innovations but in the whole process.”

The 25-year-old Bulgarian added, “There are a few key things people who are developing these very much-needed (medical) innovations can do. One of them is to be extremely clear, in very layman’s language, exactly what they’re looking for.”

She said it would also help to explain how such knowledge and innovation might influence a patient. This does not mean saying “this, maybe, will happen in 5-10 years if we do this and that. No. We need to explain it in a very simple, appetising way for the patient.”

Neuro-scientist Dr Angelo Arleo, of the Paris-based Institute of Vision, explained how he has tried to improve patient involvement in the work he does on vision healthcare, an “important priority nowadays.”

He told the audience, “We wanted to put, from the very beginning, the patient perspective in our
thinking about protocols and innovations. “The conclusion we came up was to start at ‘living life’, which is called the ‘spring line.’

This is a very good example and it’s a perfect combination of putting the patient at the centre of our approach.” Another keynote speaker on the panel, Yann Le Cam, CEO of EURORDIS, said he believed it was vital to “engage patients as early as possible.”

Le Cam noted that there was a “robust body of experience” on patient engagement in the pharmo-biotech industry, adding that a “digital transformation” in recent years had allowed patients to engage and contribute to “data generation” themselves.

The key, he believes, is to put patients on the “front line and be the drivers of change. It’s patients working with the lab and on medical and assisted devices and new apps and then taking them either to a company or creating their own company to develop them.”

He concluded, “That’s the kind of change that we see happening right now.” Over the two-day event, delegates had the opportunity to hear from some of the world’s leading experts and to share invaluable, first-hand insights and heard discussion on why defining societal health needs really matters and must be the core focus of innovation.

Attendees also had the chance to attend participatory breakout sessions including flash talks, workshops and the opportunity to ‘meet the innovators’.

About the author

Brian Johnson is the managing editor of The Parliament Magazine

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