

HEALTH PRIORITIES OF THE 2017 MALTESE EU PRESIDENCY

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Summary: Malta is at the helm of the EU between January and June 2017. The Maltese Presidency intends to continue to build on the work of previous Presidencies to tackle important priorities for which there is clear added value for action at EU level. To this end Malta has identified childhood obesity and structured cooperation between health systems as its two main thematic priorities. HIV, eHealth, Rare Diseases, medicines, cancer and antimicrobial resistance will also be on the agenda. Through a series of expert and political meetings, the Maltese Presidency aims to bring forward specific actions on the identified health priorities.

Keywords: Maltese EU Presidency, health systems, childhood obesity, eHealth, HIV

Introduction

In January 2017, Malta assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) for the first time since it acceded to the EU in 2004. This Presidency comes at a delicate moment in the history of the EU since it will have to tackle key issues that have developed at a European level, including Brexit. Nonetheless, the Maltese Presidency has identified six main priorities which it aims to push forward during its Presidency. These are: migration, the single market, security, social inclusion, Europe's neighbourhood and the maritime sector.^{1 2}

Although health policy does not feature as one of these major themes, the health and well-being of European citizens can also be positively impacted through the adoption of strategies in some of these key priority areas. More specifically, the Maltese Presidency has put together an ambitious programme of events for the health sector. The overall goal is that of highlighting issues that need cooperation across health systems for an effective

response to be mounted by Member States. The approach taken is one where needs should be identified by evidence and driven through a bottom up cooperation process between Member States, with the support of the European institutions. The Maltese Presidency is emphasising the need for the EU to prioritise social aspects and the pursuit of health and well-being for European citizens is an important component of this objective.

Legislative agenda

The Maltese Presidency will continue to work on the Proposals put forward by the Commission, namely to amend Regulation (EC) No.726/2004 laying down Community procedures for the authorisation and supervision of medicinal products for human and veterinary use and establishing a European Medicines Agency.

Besides convening the regular meetings in Brussels and in Malta, a programme of specific themed events has been developed

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around the main priorities identified. These events are expected to inform the development of Council Conclusions on childhood obesity and structured cooperation between health systems.

The Presidency health priorities

In the field of health, the Maltese Presidency will continue to build on the work carried out by the Netherlands and Slovakia as part of the Trio Presidency. It will also, however, seek to forge links with the upcoming Trio Presidency and therefore contribute to identifying the health priorities for the EU in the coming years. The main thematic priorities which will link up with planned Council Conclusions are, childhood obesity and structured cooperation between health systems. In addition, the Maltese Presidency will focus on several other topics through the organisation of specific Malta based events. These include HIV, eHealth, Rare Diseases and Cancer. Furthermore, the Maltese Presidency will follow up on the work carried out by previous Presidencies on the issues of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and access to medicines.

Childhood obesity

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions across the globe. The negative impacts that childhood obesity bears on health, productivity, quality of life, longevity and the significant related social and economic costs are well known. Malta has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the world.⁴ The key objective is to halt the rise in overweight and obesity in children and young people (0–18 years) by 2020. The Maltese Presidency aims to tackle the rise in childhood obesity by taking a strategic approach to support Member States in identifying good practices and key areas where further action is required. Malta aims to highlight the findings of the mid-term evaluation of the *EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014–2020* and to identify key areas that call for further actions.

Since children spend a large proportion of their time in schools, this presents an opportunity to alter their eating habits by exposing them to healthy and nutritious food. In the absence of procurement guidelines, many public bodies and



Launch of the new HiT health system review on Malta on 28 February: (left to right) Josep Figueras and Elias Mossialos (European Observatory), Maltese Health Minister Chris Fearne, HiT author Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat and Martin Seychell (EU Commission).

entities are obliged to go for the lowest priced contractor; however, this may give rise to children being provided with unhealthy meals. For this reason, the Maltese Presidency, in collaboration with the European Commission and Member States through members of the High Level Group on Diet and Physical Activity, the Joint Research Centre and the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization, have developed evidence-based guidelines for procurement of school food that is healthy and suitable for children.

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Structured cooperation between health systems

The health systems of Member States face common challenges which can be mitigated when Member States work together in synergy. The Maltese Presidency is working to identify mechanisms of voluntary structured cooperation between health systems to support Member State health systems

and provide tangible benefits for health professionals and patients. The Maltese EU Presidency has chosen to focus on the scope of voluntary structured cross-border cooperation between Member States to ensure access to innovative medicines and technologies as well as access to highly specialised health services. The needs of small populations, referring both to populations of smaller countries, as well as patients with Rare Diseases, are highlighted.

Structured cooperation between Member States can enhance capacity, increase equity and also improve quality and efficiency of health system interventions. Policy briefs synthesising the evidence on collaboration in the procurement of health technologies and health workforce challenges related to highly specialised health care have been prepared in collaboration with the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.^{4 5} Access to medicines and other medical technologies is still a problem in Europe, especially for small, lower income countries and or products with a small demand. These challenges are partly related to the manner in which pricing and procurement are being organised. In this area, the Maltese Presidency will seek to follow up on the Council Conclusions adopted under the Netherlands Presidency in 2016 by seeking to identify the mechanisms which will promote sustainable cooperation in the processes

of procurement of innovative medicines and technologies with a view to improving access and affordability.

The launch of the European Reference Networks (see news section of this issue) provides an opportunity to build strong cross-border professional networks to support the provision of highly specialised services and interventions for patients with Rare Diseases. Patient mobility can be completed by structured mobility of health professionals. The development of opportunities for structured cross-border medical specialist training may assist to overcome various challenges being faced by Member States in ensuring retention and development of their specialised health workforce. Ensuring good quality training opportunities across the EU will also indirectly improve access and continuity of care for European citizens.

These themes will be discussed by experts and recommendations for priority areas in which structured cooperation can support Member States' health systems, underpinned by the appropriate mechanisms that respect health system diversity, will be put forward in Council Conclusions.

eHealth

Data for Health: the key to personalised sustainable care is the central theme underpinning eHealth Week, 10–12 May 2017¹ organised by the Maltese Presidency, the European Commission and HIMSS–Europe, in collaboration with the World Health Organization. eHealth Week 2017 will gather more than 1,300 stakeholders from around the globe to address current international topics related to health care IT.

The following issues have been earmarked for discussion during eHealth Week: patient access to and sharing of health data; security and privacy of health care data; sharing personal health data across country borders; IT support for European Reference Networks; improving the effectiveness, safety and privacy of mHealth applications; scaling up digital innovation for health and care; smart environments and integrated care; data management analytics for personalised medicine and public health policy; IT

support for reform of health care systems; and new roles and shifting balances in health care. High-level delegates will also discuss the health-related objectives of the Digital Single Market.

HIV/AIDS

Although there have been impressive gains in reducing the number of AIDS diagnoses during the last decade, the burden of HIV infection remains unacceptably high in Europe. Each year about 30,000 people are newly diagnosed with HIV in the EU/EEA, and almost another 110,000 people are known to be infected in the broader European Region. Europe is the region with the fastest growing rate of infection in the world.² There is good evidence on what works to effectively prevent and control HIV. In order to reverse the HIV epidemic in the EU/EEA, countries need to scale up: HIV prevention, both in terms of coverage and uptake, especially those targeting men who have sex with men, migrants and people who inject drugs; HIV testing to reduce the undiagnosed fraction and ensure early linkage to care for people living with HIV (PLHIV) and HIV treatment and to ensure that the proportion of PLHIV with an undetectable viral load is increased, both for their personal benefit as well as to reduce future HIV transmission.

The Maltese Presidency recently brought together leading experts on HIV prevention and control from across the EU to discuss how Europe can improve its response to HIV and these ideas were summarised in a technical declaration.

Other health priorities

A series of meetings being held in Malta will focus on a number of other priority areas. Foremost amongst these is the event on Rare Diseases co-organised with EURORODIS and the research and development aspects associated with orphan medicines. The closing meeting of the CANCON project brings together years of important work carried out in the area of cancer at EU level. The need to sustain such valuable initiatives is highlighted within the overall thematic priority on structured cooperation. The Maltese Presidency has also placed medicines as a key focus area. Here meetings will discuss the need to find

ways to address the issue of high prices for innovative medicines in view of the changing nature of the industry and the need to ensure that European citizens can gain access to important medicines in a timely and affordable manner. The Maltese Presidency will also continue to follow up on the work carried out on the important topic of AMR in order to ensure that the follow up actions envisaged are being duly implemented.

The future

Throughout the dialogues on the respective priorities being discussed during the Maltese Presidency, the importance of determining the role that Member States would like the EU to play, both in taking forward work in the area of public health concerns, as well as supporting Member States to address common health system challenges, will be a key underlying consideration. The Maltese Presidency has the ambition of leaving a robust legacy in the area of health at EU level, mirroring the value and importance that health and health systems are given at a national level.

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