

Flash report: Health inequalities conference
Charlemagne conference centre (23 January 2014)

Equity health, the final conference of the Joint Action on health inequalities took place 23 January 2014. It brought together international experts on health inequalities, officials and policy makers from Member States and the EU and a range of key stakeholders.

The conference:

- Showcased the results of the Joint Action on health inequalities 'Equity Action'
- Assessed progress on addressing health inequalities in the EU
- Considered opportunities and priorities for action

Proceedings were web streamed in 6 EU languages and will be published on the joint action web site.

Speakers

Commissioner Borg gave a video presentation introduced by John F Ryan, Acting Director of Public Health DG SANCO.

There were contributions from

Sir Michael Marmot (Institute of Health Equity), Commissioner Borg (DG SANCO) and speeches from: Adonis Georgiadis – Minister of Health Greece

Frances Fitzgerald, Minister for children and youth affairs, Ireland

Pilar Farjas Abadia, Secretary General for Health and Consumer Affairs, Spain

Gediminas Cerniauskas, Vice minister of health Lithuania

Philippe Coulard – Minister for social affairs Belgium

Constance Hanneff – Committee of Regions – rapporteur for CoR opinion on the Commission Staff Working Document on health inequalities and a video contribution from Z Jakab – Regional Director WHO Europe.

In addition to DG SANCO there were contributions from Lieve Fransen, Director of Social Policies and Europe 2020 EMPL; Michael Ralph, Adviser to the Director General DG REGIO; and Barbara Kersteins, Head of Sector Public Health DG RTD

Key messages:

Tonio Borg, Commissioner for Health, said “We know that differences in social and economic conditions are major drivers of inequalities in health. This is why achieving the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy – smart, sustainable and – very importantly – inclusive growth, are essential to reduce health inequalities. We continue our efforts to push forward the health angle within the European Semester, and redouble our efforts to ensure that health is for everybody, everywhere in the EU.”

Minister Georgiadis (EL) said ‘Investing in Health, particularly during the times of the current economic crisis is one of the great challenges in Europe. The ageing population, the increase in chronic diseases, the high cost of technology, and the ensuring problems of poverty, social exclusion and health inequalities, require new strategies to tackle these problems. We should reform our health systems to ensure better access to our citizens, cost effectiveness and long

term sustainability in our health care systems. We should act “together for Health” adopting new strategic approaches. .

Investing in tackling health inequalities contributes to a more just, human and more equitable society with greater social cohesion and greater productivity. ‘

Other key messages

- The need for integrated strategies that address the social determinants of health such as housing, environment, education and employment, and those from NGOs and academia who are seeking to influence the uptake of policies to reduce health inequalities.
- The need for new ways to achieve partnership and ‘co-production’ with stakeholder and the general population at all levels of government to achieve social goals.
- Calls for Member States to make the best use of the EU’s Investment and Structural Funds to support action to reduce health inequalities, including programmes that promote early year’s development, quality education and training and fair and safe employment.
- local and regional authorities have a front line role in addressing health inequalities, and play a key role in health prevention as well as in land use policy, public safety, environment – ie they are key actors to addressing health inequalities,
- Importance of making the economic case.
- There was a call for a stronger social agenda in contributions from several speakers including BE, EL, IE.
- EL minister stressed the need for more support and defensive of the successes of the EU.
- John Ryan in a panel presentation on the role of government made clear the ongoing commitment of the Commission to the health inequalities agenda and the conference on fairness in health which will take place 18 March hosted by the European Commission.

Sir Michael Marmot, whose report on health inequalities in the EU was published in December 2013 said: “We know health inequalities are killing on a grand scale. While the impact of the economic recession is likely to have increased these risks, the start of the recovery is an opportunity to begin to reduce them. There is now overwhelming evidence that everyone in Europe should and could live in better health for longer, provided all government policies prioritise reducing health’.

Joint action on health inequalities ‘Equity Action’.

The JA has worked to strengthen the effectiveness of policy making and strategic actions to reduce health inequalities at member state, regional and EU levels. Work has included:

- Developing expertise in Health Impact Assessment and Health Equity Audit
- Improving awareness around opportunities to use structural funds on tackling health inequalities
- Strengthening regional strategies to tackle health inequalities
- Broadening the evidence base on key issues such debt and financial insecurity
- Sharing good practice on stakeholder engagement to tackle health inequality together