

WHO Regional Office for Europe - United Action for Better Health in Europe: Draft European Programme of Work 2020-2025

EFA comment on the open written consultation

The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations - EFA is the voice of 200 million people living with allergy, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe. We bring together 39 national associations from 24 countries and channel their knowledge and demands to the European institutions. We connect European stakeholders to ignite change and bridge the policy gaps on allergy and airways diseases so that patients live uncompromised lives, have the right and access to the best quality care and a safe environment.

At EFA we welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft European Programme of Work (EPW) 2020-2025, a timely document that outlines the multiple ways to support Member States' authorities in rising up to current and future health challenges, while also fleshing out the contribution of the Regional Office for Europe to the global WHO vision.

Today health in Europe stands at a crossroads. The Covid-19 public health crisis has drawn the spotlight, as well as vast resources and capacities across the region. Meanwhile, the response to the crisis -both at the EU and the national level- is set to generate those policies that will define the public health landscape in Europe for the years to come. In this context, preparedness, vaccination, research and investment in health have rapidly moved at the top of the political priorities. At the WHO level, this is reflected by one of the core strategic priorities 'Protecting against health emergencies'.

At the same moment, the draft EPW describes principles that transcend the current emergency circumstances and address longstanding needs and gaps in the area of health policy. These refer to the move towards universal health coverage, which includes serious issues of access to medicines and health services; but also the need to ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all, which requires healthy environments and action on disease risk factors. Beyond any doubt, some of these topics have become ever more acute in the context of the Covid-19 situation. However, if no decisive action is taken, they are certainly to remain as major challenges long after we pass at the other side of the pandemic.

Core strategic priority 1: Moving towards universal health coverage

Universal health coverage is profoundly linked to access to timely, affordable and high-quality health services. According to the State of Health in the EU: Companion Report 2019¹, access to health care is a concern in virtually every EU country, as gaps in the effectiveness, accessibility and resilience of health systems persist. Patients with chronic respiratory diseases are no exception: according to the EFA Access to Care report, asthma and COPD patients generally receive a late diagnosis, while treatment options often fail to prevent the worsening of patients' conditions².

Within its next EPW, EFA calls the WHO Regional Office for Europe to develop the necessary tools to achieve the goal of universal health coverage, on the basis of the following work principles:

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, *State of Health in the EU: Companion Report 2019*, https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/state/docs/2019_companion_en.pdf

² European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations, Active Asthma and COPD Patients Access Care Report, 2019 https://www.efanet.org/images/ShowLeadership/Report-Showleadership_FINAL.pdf

- Prioritise **better access to the whole spectrum of health services** ranging from prevention to diagnosis, treatment, and care. This naturally includes ensuring the availability and affordability of medicines, but also the fight against persistent access inequalities among and within European countries.
- Work towards the **provision of quality, patient-centered care**, including the streamlining of specialised care which is still elusive across the European region.
- Provide for a governance framework that promotes **patient participation**. By ensuring the involvement of patients in all the levels and processes affecting their health, patients can offer invaluable, first-hand insights into the real-world experience of living with the disease.
- Encourage **multi-level engagement** among actors from the international, regional, national and local level. In this way, future work should embed, enable and emphasize on vertical aspects of governance.

Core strategic priority 2: Protecting against health emergencies

It is beyond doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic put the European healthcare systems, social structures, economies and governments in strain, taking a heavy death toll and resulting in an enormous stress among people at risk. In a context where the European Union appears more ready than ever to reconsider its vision and role to protect the health of Europeans, as exemplified by its recent ambitious health budget proposals³, the WHO Regional Office for Europe can show the way by setting forward-looking standards in addressing the current and future public health crises.

We therefore consider the role of the WHO Regional Office for Europe as key in proposing the basic principle in order to:

- Actively promote **investment in health preparedness and national capacity-building** for crisis response. Importantly, this includes putting emphasis to improve the sustainability and resilience of healthcare systems, which were overburdened during the crisis, with access to care and treatment being significantly disrupted for patients with chronic diseases.
- Develop **strategic principles for inter-country coordination** in times of health emergencies, including on the distribution of medical equipment and medical personnel where they are mostly needed. Such principles should include appropriate training in management of resources and means.
- Engage in **stocktaking activities to identify the main gaps and drawbacks** in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, and channel key learnings effectively at the regional and national level.
- Encourage **governments to review their health plans and investments on disease prevention**, putting patient education and public information at the core of their health policies, and increasing attention to respiratory health prevention, management and care.

Core strategic priority 3: Promoting health and well-being

The promotion of health and well-being is another key expectation of European citizens. The implementation of the policies that ensure safe living and working environments, access to high-quality healthcare services and the reduction of inequalities among the citizens emerge as the main challenges of healthcare authorities in the coming years.

³ European Commission, EU4Health 2021-2027 – a vision for a healthier European Union
https://ec.europa.eu/health/funding/eu4health_en

EFA calls the WHO Regional Office for Europe to build on previous achievements and engage at all the political levels in order to:

- Provide the groundwork for **effective prevention policies** at all levels in areas ranging from indoor and outdoor environment to food, tobacco, employment and consumer products. Respiratory health is of particular importance in this respect, in light of data from 2016 showing the EU-28 drifting away from (instead of inching towards) the target of 25% reduction in mortality rate by 2025, compared to the 2011 baseline value⁴.
- Highlight best policy options for the **seamless transition of national health systems towards eHealth and mHealth**. Digital tools and applications are central for the health of chronic patients, offering great potential in both the prevention and the self-management of the diseases, while also facilitating adherence to the followed treatment.
- Promote **patient empowerment by tackling the lack of self-management plans** in chronic non-communicable diseases. There is also extensive evidence proving that actions supporting self-management among asthma and COPD patients reduces exacerbations and hospital admissions and improves patient quality of life. However, one in three of them do not feel involved in decisions towards their therapy⁵.
- Propose a solid **framework for the expansion of vaccination coverage** across the European region and reducing gaps in accessibility of vaccines. To be effective, the 'Immunisation 2030 Agenda' should put an emphasis on fighting the increasing mistrust to vaccines, as well as misinformation about the benefits of immunisation.
- Enable the **generation of information on the environmental, commercial and structural determinants** of health to form the basis of forward-looking decision-making, in line with the Global Action Plan for healthy lives and well-being for all launched in September 2019⁶.
- Promote **awareness on the challenges faced by the most vulnerable groups of the society**, such as the chronic, poor, stigmatised, and discriminated against. These challenges need to be further studied, measured, and anchored in real-world evidence.

As an active member of the WHO Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors, EFA highlights the added value of working closely with non-state actors with a view to identifying gaps, enabling policies, and supporting implementation at the EU and national level. Therefore, we would like to underline the merits of engaging in an ongoing dialogue with the civil society in order to effectuate the much-needed policy change in the area of health.

Submitted on Friday 17 July 2020 by Panagiotis Chaslaridis, Policy Advisor at the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations.

⁴ Eurostat, Causes of death statistics https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Causes_of_death_statistics - Note: the 2016 mortality rate from respiratory diseases stands at 82,7 deaths per 100.000 inhabitants, a performance which is worse than the 81 deaths/inhabitant which was the 2011 baseline and certainly further from the 2025 target which is at 60 deaths/inhabitant.

⁵ European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations, Active Asthma and COPD Patients Access Care Report, 2019 https://www.efanet.org/images/ShowLeadership/Report-Showleadership_FINAL.pdf

⁶ World Health Organisation, *Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All*, September 2019, <https://www.who.int/sdg/global-action-plan>