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Forum calls for a 'shock-proofed' EU healthcare system

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Europe's healthcare systems are in urgent need of "shock-proofing" if they are to meet the challenges posed by severe budget pressures, policymakers will be told this week at the 16th annual Gastein Health Forum in Austria.

The president of the health policy conference, Maastricht University health expert Professor Helmut Brand, said the focus would be on how to safeguard both technical and social innovation.

"Innovation is crucial to European health policy," Brand said at a pre-event discussing the themes for this year's conference, 'Resilient and Innovative Health Systems for Europe', taking place in Bad Hofgastein, Austria, from 2 to 4 October 2013.

"People get more direct benefit from innovation in healthcare than in any other area. But austerity policies are having an especially harsh impact in many countries. Making cuts and innovation do not really fit together. So where is the line? At what point do cuts become critical for health systems and endanger social safety nets?" Brand asked.

Political impact

How to 'shock-proof' Europe's endangered healthcare systems will be the central theme for this year's conference, which brings together NGOs, patient organisations, academics, healthcare providers and industry to discuss burning issues face-to-face with policymakers.

For its part, the European Commission also has the opportunity of presenting its health strategies and get feedback. Brand said he hoped that future conferences in Bad Gastein would also include representatives of the next three EU presidencies.

"This should ensure that issues which come up in Gastein directly affect actual, concrete policy," Brand said.

"Following the Treaty of Maastricht, health is an EU policy area, and political decisions in social and health policies affect the lives of individual people very directly."

No health borders

The conference has in previous years mostly addressed health policies in neighbouring regions such as south-eastern Europe.

This year the conference will also have contributions from emerging economies such Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – known as the Brics nations – , which have an increasing role in global health.

One very topical development is the ongoing free-trade negotiations between the US and the EU which will be a subject of detailed debate, Brand promised.

"It would have a major impact on the health sector in many fields."

As health issues are constantly changing, Brand said, the Gastein forum would also have to act as a seismograph and a monitor.

Past conferences notably identified at an early stage the demographic changes and their consequences, and the global spread of non-communicable diseases which were previously assumed to be a problem reserved for rich countries only, but which is swiftly becoming a global issue.

Karin Kadenbach, the conference vice president who is also a Socialist Party MEP and member of the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) Committee, emphasised the conference's commitment to socially equitable and affordable healthcare services, and to encourage healthy lifestyles.

"Those that take active responsibility for their own health are not just ensuring their own well-being," she said. "They are also helping to make sure health systems remain affordable in the future," Kadenbach added.

Positions:

Nicola Bedlington, executive director of the European Patients' Forum, said: "We see the European Health Forum Gastein as a key opportunity to step back and reflect with other stakeholders on some of the fundamental challenges facing citizens and patients in Europe. We have had the opportunity to address central policy topics for us – such as health inequalities and health literacy with lasting impact. We look forward to more of this in this the future."

Next steps:

2-4 Oct. 2013: European Health Forum Gastein

LINK: <http://www.euractiv.com/specialreport-resilient-innovati/health-forum-calls-shock-proof-e-news-530820>