

From Nice to Lisbon: an important step forward for EU Health? 17 November 2009, Brussels

On 17 November Health First Europe organised a high-level roundtable at the European Parliament entitled "From Nice to Lisbon: an important step forward for EU Health?" Co-hosted by MEP Nessa Childers (Ireland, S&D) and MEP Antonio Correia de Campos (Portugal, S&D), the round table was attended by over 40 participants with an interest in EU Health policy. HFE members and other key stakeholders took this opportunity to gain valuable insights into the many changes that will have an impact on health policy in the coming years.

The roundtable was promoted to celebrate Health First Europe's (HFE) 5 year anniversary and simultaneously initiate discussion over the future of EU Health policy within the Lisbon Treaty and the new European Parliament (EP) attributed powers.

John Bowis, former member of the EP, presented the apologies of Mr David Byrne, HFE's patron, and initiated the discussion by saying that Health has been a European concern since the Treaty of Rome where safety at work and labour regulations insured that the topic was not absent from European objectives.

As the session moderator, John Bowis began by saying that he was honoured to become HFE's Honorary President. He described himself as a health enthusiast who will continue to work on ensuring that health remains a priority in the EU's political agenda. He expressed his concern over the challenges that the economic crisis is putting on healthcare systems in Europe and the need to find mechanisms that solve this in a long term fashion.

Fabian Zuleeg, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre, called for a rethink on healthcare delivery. 'The world has changed and with the economic crisis and an increase in unemployment, there will be radical changes in the way healthcare is delivered,' he said. He also defended that the EU institutions need to be less defensive and should try to challenge MS into developing more progressive and technologically friendly initiatives.

The newly elected MEP Nessa Childers spoke of the impact of the Lisbon Treaty. She said that most competences regarding health issues will remain under the jurisdiction of the Member States but that 'there will be an increase in European cross-border cooperation' and an increased effort to reduce health inequalities throughout the EU.

MEP Correia who is also newly elected and formerly served as Health Minister in Portugal said that health has always had a low profile in the EU mainly because it has been considered a national matter. He added that despite health being included as part of EU legislation from the very start, it has been considered from an economic perspective.

Numerous other issues came into consideration and discussion namely the introduction of new technologies into the health market and service providers, the need to include social consultations in the legislative health process, the improvement and management of health related infrastructures in the EU and the approximation of objectives between Member States.

Mary Banotti, former HFE President, mentioned the differences that are still felt between legislators and the European population. That these development and objective gaps need to be tackled and immediate care must not be forgotten in the global scheme of healthcare development.

Fabian Zuleeg summed up the meeting by saying that even though the obstacles posed to healthcare development in Europe are serious, the time has come to have a look on both the demand and the supply sides together and create an adequate strategy.

MEP Childers finished her statements by saying that the idea of restructuring the system is highly political and contentious. The solution is for all involved actors to become pro-active and work together.

MEP Correia subscribed to this view and advised the president of the European Commission to exploit all the words in Article 169 of the Lisbon Treaty and bet on innovation directed to health issues.

The event was a great success in what concerns exchange of opinions and the consideration of the different elements included into healthcare policy-making.

Overall, the roundtable discussion fulfilled its initial goal and provided both the speakers and the representatives of stakeholders with a broader image of how the Lisbon Treaty will influence the future of healthcare in the EU.