Health First Europe reception at the European Parliament: “EU legislation to reduce injuries for healthcare workers”

On 23 March 2010, Health First Europe (HFE) celebrated the adoption by the EPSCO Council of the Directive implementing the Framework Agreement on the prevention from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector.

Over 40 people from across the healthcare sector (policy makers, regional officers, industry representatives, health workers and insurers) attended this event which was hosted by MEP Elizabeth Lynne (ALDE, UK) in the European Parliament.

Health First Europe, an organisation supporting the protection of EU healthcare workers from injuries with used needles and other medical sharps, has been campaigning in the past six years for the implementation of binding measures.

Mr Roy Bridges, an HFE Executive Committee member, thanked all speakers for seeking to protect healthcare workers from sharps injuries across Europe. “We were very happy to engage with Liz Lynne MEP and Stephen Hughes MEP in 2004. (...) It has been a long journey and there were challenging steps but owing to the commitment of all the stakeholders, especially the social partners, we’ll now change the nature of health workers protection in the EU” he said in his opening speech.

MEP Elizabeth Lynne who has been advocating for this cause from the very beginning commented that she had been happy to help HFE. She stressed that “without dedication, one could not achieve anything” explaining why she and so many others worked so hard over the years to push and bring the initiative forward.

She further mentioned MEP Stephen Hughes and former MEP John Bowis (now HFE Honorary President) who, along with her, had been liaising with former Commissioner Vladimír Špidla. Their political willingness had been conditional on the successful outcome.

Liz Lynne also welcomed the dedication of nurses, healthcare workers and social partners “for not giving up”. “It is a victory for us all and shows that without [their] tenacity, we wouldn’t have legislation today” she added.

Mr Máximo González, President of the (Spanish) General Council of Nurses, reminded the audience the long path to the binding rules on sharp injuries. “30 years ago, it would have been impossible to have legislation at national level let alone in the European Parliament”, he observed.

He explained that in Spain, social and healthcare workers had started making tangible proposals 5 years ago. Now, in different regions in Spain, policy makers were developing and implementing laws by means of voluntary agreements.

Mr González therefore called for a thorough implementation of the European directive. In his view, there was still ”a long way to go and many difficulties to overcome in order to do so because the transposition is complicated”. ”We will be watching over the implementation in the regions, raise awareness and call politicians to action where appropriate”.

As to the future perspectives, the President of the General Council of Nurses had already engaged with the Spanish Presidency. The association will be distributing guidelines, preparing a European day of biosecurity and also propose a yearly celebration for the anniversary of the directive’s approval (on 8 March).

Mr González finally thanked MEP Liz Lynne and MEP Stephen Hughes: “as MEPS you have many important things on your agenda, but remember that many lives will be saved due to this directive. Each life which is saved, you can be extremely proud of”.

Ms Ana Salegui, a Spanish nurse who got infected following a needle-stick injury, then took the floor picking up on Liz Lynne’s speech: “I have waited half of my working life to have this directive; and there are few moment’s in one’s life which are truly important. But today is one of those”.

She evoked the times back in the 1980’s where there were no prevention and no awareness rising campaigns, where healthcare workers were left alone and didn’t have anyone to talk to, where they were sometimes even practically shunned from society.
Ms Salegui voiced concerns that healthcare workers would still have difficult times. For the remaining cases of sharp injuries, it is worth remembering that they can ultimately lead to serious infections and to death and the lapse of time to get the results are sometimes unbearable.

She therefore hailed the adoption of the legislation as a positive step to combat segregation and discrimination against infected workers and, of course, to ensure a high level of security for medical staff and patients.

"Many people fear to be fired because of infection from sharps injuries, but all who have suffered and all who will be infected one day now have the directive. We can thank the European Parliament, Liz Lynne, Stephen Hughes, John Bowis, HFE and all who are not there. I now hope that the people responsible for applying the laws will be sensitive because we need implementation urgently, immediately", she concluded.

Mr Paul de Raeve, Secretary General of the European Federation of Nurses, expressed his happiness that the directive was finally adopted. "Still, we need to keep the momentum going in order to make sure that it will be implemented. Thus, we look forward to working with you all", he said.

Mr Bert Van Caelenberg, EUROFEDOP Secretary General, emphasised the rewarding cooperation between stakeholders and the European Parliament: "Members are here for us and we are here for the Members". He then called for new member countries to join in the effort.

As a conclusion, Mr Roy Bridges recalled the 2004 event organised in the European Parliament entitled 'HFE warning on World AIDS day: Europe’s healthcare workers at risk’ which figured the start of the journey.

"The European Parliament may get a lot of criticism for national press but this is a good example of practical progress”. "Working together can lead to positive achievements which are cause for thanks and celebration", he added before opening the reception.

Health First Europe is a non-profit organisation made up of patients, healthcare professionals, medical academics and experts. They are focused on ensuring that every European citizen is entitled to the very highest healthcare standards and access to innovative and effective treatments.