

SHORT REPORT

EUREGHA and WHO Regions for Health Network – Joint Conference:

The role of regions towards future-proof, resilient and connected health systems

On Monday, 5 December, EUREGHA – the reference network of European Regional and Local Health Authorities – and the World Health Organisation’s Regions for Health Network (RHN) jointly organised a high-level conference in a meaningful setting kindly provided by the European Committee of the Regions. With 100+ on-site participants and 50+ joining online, the event was a unique opportunity for the networks to celebrate respectively their 10th and 30th anniversary and to deep dive into the role of regions in building and boosting more resilient and future-proof health and care systems in Europe, towards the ambitious European Health Union project. High-level representatives from the European Commission, WHO Europe, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, and regional representatives set the context for exchange on three critical topics: value-based healthcare, digital transformation, and cross-border cooperation.

Giovanni Gorgoni, EUREGHA’s President, opened the Conference and celebrations of the anniversaries by recalling the *“lenses through which EUREGHA sees the future of health in European regions”*, according to its 10th Anniversary Statement: *“Value-based healthcare as the way we make what’s actually matters for health and social care; digital transformation as the biggest chance to reshape healthcare processes, augment possibilities and fulfill health gaps; cross-border healthcare as the starting point of healthcare integration; regions as a concept close to community”*. Following Mr Gorgoni’s words, **Bettina Maria Menne**, Coordinator of the healthy settings program at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, officially launched the three-day WHO RHN General Assembly, stressing: *“Compared to 30 years ago, we live much healthier but we still have many challenges to address, as shown by the COVID-19 pandemic. These days we will be asking ourselves how to strengthen further our health systems and to boost a healthy population”*.

The event, co-moderated by **Bettina Maria Menne** and **Michele Calabro’**, Director of EUREGHA, then featured three recorded high-level welcomes from **Hans Henri Kluge**, WHO Regional Director for Europe, **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**, President of the European Committee of the Regions, and **Hilde Crevits**, Vice-Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and Flemish Minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family. In the frame of the anniversaries celebrations, they emphasised the leading role of regions in promoting healthy societies and the importance of having a community to exchange ideas and good practices to nurture health and social care communities.

Dimitra Panteli, Programme Manager at the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, introduced the topic of **value-based healthcare** based on the Observatory's recent work, emphasizing that *"regional and local authorities are frequently left out of policy decision-makers, but we need their perspectives"*. On the same subject, **Kaisa Immonen**, Director of Policy at the European Patients' Forum, brought the patients' perspective in the debate, stating they *"should be considered as active agents and partners of care, not just patients"*, highlighting the importance of *"shifting from the buzzword 'empowerment' to talking about participatory approaches and partnerships collaboration"*. **Sally Lewis**, National Clinical Director for Value-Based Healthcare in Wales, shared insights into efforts of transforming Wales' healthcare system through VBHC: *"we have started to tackle this nationally, and then we have had to align it with our other healthcare strategies"*. And about citizens' involvement: *"people need to be supported and coached through this shift"*.

On this topic, the open exchange with the audience highlighted the prominence of outcomes measurement and data evidence as the main enabler to boosting value in health and the need to take into account also the qualitative component, which can reflect more appropriately the real living experiences of people. The importance of participatory models and shared decision-making emerged as a key issue, but also the need for a cultural change behind it, as well as the engagement of different actors (such as the finance community) in the conversations. This connects to the issue of resource allocation, in which health promotion and prevention were confirmed as the most cost-effective way to promote and improve health and wellbeing.

About **digital transformation**, **David Novillo**, Unit Head of Data and Digital Health at WHO Europe, presented the key elements of the new Regional Digital Health action plan for the WHO European Region, emphasizing that *"we should establish a regional direction: set standards and develop evidence-based technical guidance and formulation guidance, enhancing country capacities, building networks for knowledge exchange, and conducting analysis for scaling-up"*. Given the significance of the European Health and Data Space on this topic, the participation of **Fulvia Raffaelli**, Head of Unit Digital Health at DG SANTE, was important for clarifying the next steps of the European Commission's proposal, also from a regional standpoint. In her opinion, *"This is an ambitious project and we know that we need both human and financial resources. Regions will have a key role in the implementation of the EHDS and in addressing the ensuing challenges, such as improving the communication and data exchange, and upscaling the skills of healthcare professionals"*. **Isabelle Johansson**, Head of EU Office at Region Östergötland, shared Östergötland's perspective on the impact of the EHDS on regions: *"For us, the EHDS and, in general, the digitalisation of our health systems is a natural step forward"*, but added, *"we need more clarity on some details of the proposal, especially in the first pillar of primary use"*.

During the discussion, the audience brought up some regional examples of the use of EU funds for digital transformation, such as the work of Flanders (BE) to adapt their regional data system towards international standards to be compliant with the EHDS and cross-border healthcare. However, the debate showed differences between regions across Europe concerning approaches and state-of-

the-art of digital transformation. The linkage between digital health records and healthcare integration, as well as the need for increased digital health literacy and simplicity of digital devices, were pointed out. The audience confirmed the lack of harmonized standards for data quality and reliability as one of the main barriers to overcome.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant setbacks to **cross-border cooperation** in recent decades, seriously affecting the economies and mobility of many regions, as well as citizens' access to emergency services. **Donata Meroni**, Head of Unit for Health Monitoring and Cooperation at DG SANTE, enriched the discussion by giving some updates on the recently evaluated Cross-border Healthcare Directive, stressing that *"it should support cooperation better, but there are still challenges"*. **Julia Winkler**, Project Manager at Lower Austria and HealthAcross Initiative, presented the achievements of her region in CBHC and stressed practical challenges currently faced, particularly after the pandemic, emphasizing patients' perspectives and raising an important discussion point: *"Where, how, and who pays for the treatments when it comes to cross-border health?"*. When debating potential solutions to these challenges, **Matthias Wismar**, Programme Manager at the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, emphasized what we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic: *"It's not just about patients, it is also about health care workers, services, and expertise that need to cross a border"*, and added: *"In the end, it is all about universal healthcare coverage and health system performance"*.

As emerged during the panel, the complexity of administrative procedures to access cross-border healthcare is the obstacle that regions are most concerned about, according to the attendees. Some active associations on the topic, such as the Cross-border Institute of Healthcare Systems and Prevention (CBI) and euPrevent, enriched the debate with their experiences, highlighting the importance of tracking similarities and barriers between border regions to improve cooperation. Many other topics have been subject of discussion, such as capacity building and workforce mobility.

In their final remarks, the co-moderators **Michele Calabro'** and **Bettina Maria Menne** closed the event by pointing out that transformation, cooperation, and exchange are the key concepts through which regions can strengthen their healthcare systems and improve European citizens' health. Mr Calabro' and Ms Menne also stressed how the conference represented an excellent example of joint activities between the two networks, and the perfect occasion to build further collaboration going forward, to further promote the importance of regions towards future-proof, resilient and connected health systems delivering better care for all.

Following the closing of the event, onsite participants had the chance to network and exchange views while visiting an exhibition of regional profiles and best practices from both EUREGHA and WHO RHN members.

For more information about the event and the full recording, click [here](#).