

PGEU Position Paper on the Programme for the Union's action in the field of health for the period 2021-2027 ("EU4Health Programme")

PGEU, the European organisation representing community pharmacists, welcomes the European Commission's proposal for a **stand-alone EU health programme for the period 2021-2027**. We especially support the proposed actions to address the problem of medicines shortages and to improve health systems resilience and performance, including through a stronger focus on prevention and health promotion.

Please find below PGEU's views on the main objectives highlighted in the EU4Health Programme.

1. Tackling cross-border threats

Faced with increasing cross-border threats to public health, as it has been emphasised with the Covid19 crisis, the effective protection of European citizens requires a Europe-wide cooperation.

In particular, we believe the Covid19 crisis has shown the importance of recognising community pharmacists as primary health care services providers to improve access to healthcare, for example by answering health related questions, via triage service and home delivery of medicines and medical devices to the most vulnerable patients, thus help shifting the delivery of care from overburdened general practitioners ('GPs') and secondary care. Furthermore, during this crisis, community pharmacists have played a key role in assisting the health authorities in distributing certified protective equipment such as face masks and providing advice to the public on their correct and safe use together with information on other hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

We also welcome the proposed actions to tackle antimicrobial resistance (AMR). AMR could indeed lead, by 2050, to 10 million deaths globally and have a major impact on our economy if no action is undertaken to tackle this issue. The EU has a central role to play in this fight to help Member States in containing the spread of AMR. In this context, we would like to highlight the necessity to take actions and fully implement the EU action plan on AMR by involving community pharmacists in addition to other health professionals in AMR Action Plans at national level while strengthening the collaboration between health professionals under the WHO's 'One Health' approach.

Indeed, community pharmacists play a vital role in fostering and supporting the prudent and efficient use of medicines. Community pharmacists across Europe are ideally placed to advise patients on the appropriate handling and disposal of pharmaceuticals, including on antimicrobials. In addition to several State or government-led disposal and collection schemes for medicines, the majority of the European population can return expired or unused medicines to their community pharmacy. Since community pharmacies are easily accessible and frequently visited by the public, Member States should ensure that, where implemented, pharmacy-led disposal and collection schemes are appropriately funded in order to make the best use of these resources.

2. Making medicines available and affordable

PGEU very much welcomes the European Commission's proposal to address medicines shortages and increase security of supplies, such as supporting action to monitor shortages of medicines and medical

devices occurring in hospitals and community pharmacies¹. First and foremost, we believe that when developing laws, policies and business strategies that can affect the timely and adequate supply of medicines, it must always be ensured that patients' needs are put first. Equally, effective compliance with EU and national laws related to the public service obligations of supply chain actors needs to be assured. We would also welcome a closer cooperation and coordination between EU Member States and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to improve reporting, monitoring and communication on medicine shortages at EU level. This should go hand in hand with increased transparency and effective communication to all relevant stakeholders. We are firmly convinced that timely and complete information on (anticipated) shortages will reduce the negative impact on patients and will allow health professionals to better manage patient care and ensure continuity of necessary treatment for patients.

In addition, PGEU supports coordinated actions at EU level to ensure appropriate availability, accessibility and affordability of crisis relevant products and other necessary health supplies.

3. Strengthening health care systems

PGEU also agrees it is vital to strengthen health systems and the healthcare workforce, including by digital transformation and by increased integrated and coordinated work among the Member States, as well as by sustained implementation of best practice and data sharing, while respecting the legitimate purpose of the use of health data in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules and by taking the necessary measures to avoid any misuse thereof.

To strengthen national health care systems it is necessary to fully respect the subsidiarity principle as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty on the Functioning of European Union, as well as Member States' competence and responsibilities to determine the organisation of the national health care systems. As suggested by the Motion for resolution of the European Parliament of 10 July 2020 on "The EU's public health strategy post-COVID-19"², PGEU strongly supports the implementation of a 'health in all policies' approach, with the integration of health aspects in, and a systematic health impact assessment for all relevant policies and pieces of legislation.

As recommended by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO Europe) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), recently many European countries have introduced changes in legislation to expand the role of pharmacists and relieve pressure on the rest of the healthcare system. Some countries have also secured additional funds to empower pharmacists in their vital work on the frontline against COVID-19. In several countries, pharmacists have been given the opportunity to renew repeat prescriptions for chronic medications and distribute certain hospital medicines in pharmacies for patients who need them. In some countries, community pharmacists have also activated protocols to help victims of domestic violence to report abuses during the lockdown.

Facing similar public health challenges, such as the ageing of the population, the rising incidence of chronic diseases and the increasing hesitancy towards vaccines, European countries certainly benefit from exchange and collaboration at EU level. In this regard, PGEU welcomes the European Commission's proposed actions for the surveillance, prevention, diagnosis and treatment and care of non-communicable diseases, and notably of cancers. We strongly believe the wide local network of

¹ <https://www.pgeu.eu/medicine-shortages/>

² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2020-0216_EN.html

community pharmacies across Europe should be an integral part of strategies aiming to improve vaccination coverage and fight vaccination hesitancy.

Community pharmacists already provide an increasing number of public health services extending far beyond simply the dispensing of medicines. This contributes to the resilience of health systems in Europe, by playing a key role in increasing accessibility, affordability and quality of healthcare, as well as by reducing the pressure on general practitioners and overburdened secondary care systems³.

As it has been shown in several Member States, expanding the role of community pharmacy and strengthening primary care systems are key policy levers to lead the way towards a more sustainable, inclusive and healthier future in Europe. In order to enhance the health status and quality of life of EU citizens it is crucial to involve primary care professionals, including community pharmacists, in raising public health awareness, participating in disease prevention and control and supporting health promotion. Community pharmacy services, such as medicines use review, screening services, vaccination, smoking cessation, minor ailment management, etc., have proven to improve adherence, disease prevention and, ultimately, patient outcomes while being cost-effective measures.

Having traditionally being among the most digitalized actors in the healthcare system, community pharmacists are at the forefront of shaping a sustainable healthcare system in the digital age with electronic prescriptions, electronic medication plans, electronic health records, data sharing, preventing unnecessary GPs consultations, avoiding medication errors thus hospital admissions, and duplications of treatments.

Finally, PGEU acknowledges⁴ the value of innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) as well as the access and analysis of Big Data and consider these technologies to be a useful tool to support health professionals and EU health systems and policies. In routine practice, these tools shall always be accompanied by pharmacists' expert and professional advice in order to improve workflow efficiency, while promoting patient safety, therapy effectiveness and offering the highest standard of pharmacy services to patients. In the era of digitalization and multiple information sources, community pharmacy remains a trusted source of reliable and independent health information for patients. The potential use of real-world evidence including evidence generation in community pharmacies to evaluate effectiveness and therapeutic added value of innovative medicines in practise should therefore also be rewarded. As indicated above, GDPR rules should be respected so that patients can continue relying on their pharmacist.

PGEU also recommends promoting interoperability of information systems in Europe to foster exchange of data across community pharmacies and across health professionals. Furthermore, we recommend using AI and new digital technologies to boost inter-professional collaboration as well as to promote integration of primary care systems.

We look forward to working with the European Parliament and with the other healthcare stakeholders to further improve the Commission proposal and set up an ambitious health programme that can improve the health of European citizens and build on the lessons learnt from the Covid19 pandemic.

³ <https://www.pgeu.eu/sustainability-of-health-systems/>

⁴ <https://www.pgeu.eu/big-data-artificial-intelligence/>