

Editorial

Is Health a Right or Common Currency: A Missed Opportunity for Europe?

SCOTT C. RATZAN

Modern history has provided few opportunities to develop guiding principles and constitutional rights that could affect millions by placing an appropriate value on health. The first major attempt was in 1946 with the United Nations' World Health Organization Constitution, which stated: "The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

Now, the long and intricate process of formulating a new constitution for the European Union has provided an opportunity to clarify the meaning of this right for Europe's more than 450 million "citizens." The various working groups and different parties involved have provided their input and the proposal will now be taken forward into a new Intergovernmental Conference, which will conclude at the end of this year.

Many observers had hoped that the new constitutional proposal would value health and enhance the role of the EU in coordinating and assuring the quality of public health across the Member States. However, despite the positive recommendations of the Constitutional Convention's social working group, generally favorable discussions in the Convention as a whole, and Health Commissioner David Byrne's repeated calls for action, the current proposal does not live up to the positive expectations: health will remain the principal responsibility of the Member States.

This is a lost opportunity. The new Constitution could have been a chance to develop a European era with leadership and a vision of social well-being. The public health of Europe could have become a common currency, without linguistic, geographic, or political borders.

There are various reasons why this lost opportunity is regrettable. First of all, health knows no boundaries. While many health activities are local and personal, the recent SARS epidemic, HIV/AIDS, and Mad Cow disease remind us that health is universal; microbes do not remain in confined areas. Therefore, it stands to reason that the individual Member States cannot address many health problems affecting Europeans.

Second, all Europeans will need health care at some point in their lives. Health could be considered the most important element in life—without health, nothing else is possible. At an individual level, this is a globally shared value. In addition, increasing the role of the EU in health matters would lessen the common perception of the EU as solely

Scott C. Ratzan, MD, MPA, MA, is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives*. He also is Vice President, Government Affairs, Europe for Johnson & Johnson, with academic appointments at George Washington University School of Public Health, Tufts University School of Medicine, Yale University School of Medicine, The College of Europe, and University of Cambridge.

focusing on economic and monetary matters. A constitutional mandate to value health almost undoubtedly would bring the EU closer to its citizens.

Third, tackling health at the EU level would directly support the new objective of the EU formulated at the Lisbon Summit in 2000: “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.” In this context, sacrificing a constitutional commitment to public health for short-term political goals is a risky route to follow. Health should be considered an integral part of the EU’s strategy as spending on it consumes more than 10% of European GDP, provides millions of jobs, and directly affects each of us as patients.

And of course, healthier people live longer and have stronger incentives to invest in developing their and their children’s knowledge and skills. Healthier populations tend to have higher labor market productivity contributing to, rather than withdrawing from, pension schemes. Similarly, healthier people use the health system less, and coupled with education and cognitive function, appropriately demand fewer health services.

Fourth, while global multilateral bodies such as the World Health Organization have an important role in developing global public health regulations, these bodies are too far removed from the necessary European network and system of national laboratories and interventions that help provide clean water, educate the public about disease prevention and timely treatment, and detect and effectively manage the epidemics that increasingly impact upon our population.

Fifth, specific constitutional language defining EU responsibilities for health would formalize the current trend towards increased co-operation between Member States. An obvious example is the ongoing High Level Reflection Process on Patient Mobility, which aims to address the growing cross-border mobility of patients in a proactive fashion. Although co-operation in the process is voluntary, 14 Member States have signed up so far, having recognized that they can no longer address this issue successfully as individual countries.

Another important current example of EU-wide co-operation is the ongoing discussion relating to an Open Method of Coordination in the field of health and care for older people. This follows the success of this approach in other areas where individual state competence is limited, such as social exclusion and employment. This process will lead to Member States devising National Action Plans on health, based on a given set of criteria, proposed by the Commission and endorsed by the Council of Ministers.

In conclusion, a sound EU-wide political foundation that values health is necessary. This is of great importance particularly as the aging population grows, threats of biologic and chemical weapons increase, and epidemics of preventable diseases such as heart disease and certain cancers continue to advance.

The opportunity to develop a quality European health priority that is focused on patients, evidence-based, promotes informed dialogue and choice, encourages local ownership and implementation with partnerships, and includes ethical and transparent communication should not be lost in political wrangling.

All of us who value life should attempt to advance health as a common interest for positive political, economic, social, and human impact, thereby contributing to stability and quality of European life. If Europe were to value health on the constitutional level as an economic investment and common currency, we would ensure a healthier world for our own and future generations.