Please explain to us why the creation of a strategic approach to improving health literacy is so important.

Austria regards health literacy as a key determinant of health. People with better health literacy have better health behaviours, use more preventive and less treatment-oriented services, are better at self-care and have better treatment outcomes. In addition, economic analyses point out that insufficient health literacy negatively impacts on the cost for health care. Strategies to improve health literacy both contribute to health care economics and to lower noncommunicable disease (NCD) rates by improving patient outcomes and the health of the general population. Achieving these benefits requires a systematic, strategic and comprehensive approach, rather than arbitrary and isolated interventions.

Strategic approaches first need capacity building, and in Austria we first needed to define national health targets to help improve health literacy. A number of stakeholders from different sectors were involved in this process. However, it soon became clear that health literacy is a huge and complex goal, which meant that we would need a structured and coordinated approach to begin our work. Therefore, as we began to define our goals and the strategic areas for interventions, we also built up the Austrian Health Literacy Alliance, which is a steering group located at the Austrian Health Promotion Fund. It is comprised of stakeholders from health care, but also – following the concept of Health in all Policies – other relevant sectors such as education, youth work and sports. The members of this alliance have worked to develop various approaches and interventions intended to help improve health literacy in Austria.

This process focuses on the constant evolution of our strategic approach, which allows for joint ownership, and provides guidance and orientation for various stakeholders.

Please discuss some of the challenges you have faced in developing your nationwide health literacy approach.

Before the publication of the first comparative European Health Literacy Study (HLS-EU) in 2011, health literacy was not on the agenda of Austrian decision-makers. The importance of this relatively new concept had to sink in. In the beginning, it was very important for Austrian scientists involved in the HLS-EU study to present and explain the concept of health literacy in principle. Health literacy received a lot of media coverage, and the fact that 56% of Austrians had only limited health literacy began to alarm politicians and decision-makers in public health and health care.

Once the topic had made it onto the political agenda in 2012 it was important to find ways to improve health literacy. Austria was one of the first countries in Europe to take up the topic; we had to find many of our own solutions. Addressing health literacy across different sectors and embracing all of the various health actors remains a challenge. Health Literacy was incorporated into the Austrian Health Targets, which are important for addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Austrian Health Literacy Alliance...
served as the focus of our coordinated effort to face this challenge.

The alliance has developed five strategic priorities aimed at improving a specific determinant of health literacy. Our understanding of health literacy is based on the definitions of the HLS-EU-survey: how easy or difficult it is for a person to find, have access to, appraise and apply health related information. This means that health literacy depends on the provision of accurate health information as well as health services that people can easily find, understand and use to make health-related decisions. But making all of this work will continue to require political leadership.

Here’s what we are doing to accomplish our task:

1. Working to improve the quality of health care communication, including the communication skills of health professionals, which is a critical part of the patient’s ability to understand the information they are being provided. Our national strategy is being implemented with strong support from the health and social insurance sector, and also in close cooperation with educational institutions in the health care field.

2. Ensuring that quality written and audio-visual health information is available to help people make properly informed health decisions. We help to fund and also promote a national set of criteria for the production and dissemination of health information products. We also established a national health information internet portal and a phone service line for health-related questions.

3. While it is important to improve the health literacy responsiveness of health care professionals, it is also important for patients to know how to effectively communicate with health service providers. Austria has developed a national version of the Ask Me 3 campaign, which sensitizes and enables patients to ask health care providers the questions that are important to them. Some social insurance organizations and provinces ("länder") and a number of health care institutions are taking up this idea.

4. Health care organizations must both train and equip health providers with high quality professional communication and information products in order for them to effectively respond to the needs of patients. Therefore, we support health care organizations with specific tools to improve leadership and organizational development.

5. To properly improve our activities we need to measure our progress. Austria therefore has taken a leading role in preparing the next European Health Literacy Survey.

How will the improvement of health literacy in Austria be measured? How will you know when your goals have been achieved?

Measuring health literacy is an important part of our work. Data gathered during the first European Health Literacy Survey helped us develop our activities around health literacy. From our experience, we know how important it is to measure and evaluate both national and international data. Therefore, Austria was one of the drivers in founding the WHO Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational Health Literacy, known as the M-POHL network, which calls for establishing comparative surveys of population health literacy at regular intervals.

In February 2018, Austria hosted the kick-off meeting of M-POHL and helped coordinate the network, which now includes 25 Member States. Up to 17 Member States plan to participate in the next European Health Literacy Survey, which will take place between November 2019 and March 2020. As M-POHL is very relevant to us, I am very happy to see that the network has a clear place in the WHO Europe Regional Office’s draft roadmap on health literacy.

In addition to measuring health literacy, we also monitor progress in relation to all of our activity areas, using quantitative indicators and qualitative approaches, including feedback from participants through various reporting mechanisms. That information is then used for future planning.

What has the public’s reaction been to the health literacy activities?

It is important to note that health literacy widely depends on how successful we are in providing people with accurate health information and services that are easy to find, understand and use as a basis for their health-related decisions and actions. In our attempt to be most effective in that direction, our strategic approach targets first the providers of health-related communication, information and services. We are very happy to see that we are successful, as the interest in health literacy in the professional community is constantly increasing. For example, we observe that more and more teaching institutions include health literacy into the professional education of health care professionals. More and more organizations – in
health care, but also in other sectors such as extra-curricular youth work – invest in their organizational health literacy responsiveness. This success is a joint achievement of our efforts to advance health literacy, the activities and investments of health and social insurance, the strong role of several Austrian provinces ["länder"] in improving health literacy, and a number of actors in other sectors.

**How does Austria’s strategic approach to health literacy fit and work with the WHO European Regional Office’s goals for health literacy?**

In line with the Regional Office, we understand health literacy as crucial for Health 2020 and is a pillar for reaching the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 3, but also the other health-related SDGs. Furthermore, health literacy is important for equity in health care, which is also high on the Regional Office’s agenda. Since health literacy is not equally distributed within the society, a person’s health literacy level can also be understood as a social determinant of health. Improving health literacy is key for us to help reducing the social gap in relation to health and quality of life throughout the life course. Moreover, we see of course the huge potential of health literacy in the fight against the NCDs, which is also a global priority.

As Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection I am supportive of the suggestion of the Regional Office of Europe to launch a roadmap on health literacy that clearly outlines the way forward. Austria is very happy to contribute and share its experiences with other interested Member States.

**Disclaimer:** The interviewee alone is responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.