Dancing with elephants – New partnerships for health, democracy, business

Early in 2020, the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) team and advisory bodies invited the health community to “join the dancefloor” at the three-day physical conference in the beautiful Gastein Valley in autumn, as usual.

The proposed theme focused on questions regarding if, when, and how to rethink partnerships with those big players that health usually shies away from, or even demonises, in a productive and open way. And how to bring fresh air and momentum into existing partnerships, striving to continuously improve multisectoral collaboration for better health for all. Little did we know back then that nothing would be “business as usual”, and that the dancefloor would be a digital one, dominated by an ominous dance partner – COVID-19.

While 2020 was a challenging year for everyone, it continues to be encouraging that the health community seems determined not to let this crisis pass without harnessing its momentum. Rather than just bemoaning the shortcomings of the initial European Union (EU) reaction to the pandemic as well as the overall lack of international coordination of crisis responses, there has been a real push for thinking about how to make things better in the future. Most remarkably, calls for a strong European Health Union have mushroomed in several settings this year and this was also the topic of the EHFG 2020 Closing Plenary. How can we realise a greater role for the EU in health in a way that retains national sovereignty in health policymaking? Is it better to have stewardship of existing tools, new instruments, even a treaty change – or a mixture of them all? At the EHFG 2020, we saw one common thread running through all our sessions: how COVID-19 has painfully aggravated the shortcomings of our health systems and highlighted those areas in the direst need of sustainable change. Against this backdrop, we invite you to accompany us on a short journey through some of the themes discussed at the digital Gastein Forum this year, spanning our 2020 topic tracks: resilient systems, from data to decisions, and empowerment and agency.

The recent collaboration with one of our more frequent dancing partners, namely the pharmaceutical industry, has proven, in an impressive manner, how much can be achieved in very little time. The development and joint work on securing the production of several COVID-19 vaccine candidates could set a precedent for other areas, such as Antimicrobial Resistance – and the new pharmaceutical strategy for the EU, explored in the article by Cogan and Nolan in this issue, is a first promising step in that direction. Another topic discussed at the EHFG 2020 and considered by Heiss in this Eurohealth is the opportunities and threats of digitalisation and data: how do we counteract the ongoing “infodemic” and provide citizens with the tools needed for navigating an information environment in which anyone can contribute, without proper fact-checking mechanisms? How can digitalisation pave the way towards more equitable and integrated health care systems? Could the pandemic be an epiphany that finally forces us to confront the necessity of data standardisation and data sharing, and push us to truly mobilise the resources needed to gain some ground on this matter? And how can we learn from private industry in the field, in order to engage in partnerships at eye level and harness the untapped potential that may spring from them?

One thing is for sure: we are at a crossroads in history, with only an endless list of open questions to guide us. Let us take all the right turns, together. We hope you enjoy reading this 8th Gastein edition of Eurohealth!

Clemens Martin Auer, President, European Health Forum Gastein

Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb, Secretary General, European Health Forum Gastein

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