

EN - 16 March 2020: Invest in health for all: “spread solidarity, not the virus”

Today, more than ever, it is urgent to act. The COVID-19 outbreak shows us the importance of coordinated action, not only in our own local health systems, but also nationally and internationally. What we need *now* is a strong solidarity-based health system for all and coordination that surpasses national borders, with effective action on a European and a global level.

Ensuring public health means that we make sure that the most vulnerable of us can also access all health measures to be taken. Uneven distribution of resources is compromising our ability to control the virus and is leading us to unnecessary suffering and death today and tomorrow.

This crisis is only the tip of the iceberg. For several years, the health systems of European Member States have undergone strong attacks from privatization, commercialization, underfunding and regionalization, imposed by the European Union through austerity measures on health spending. This has affected health systems' ability to coordinate large-scale preventive campaigns and has limited their capacity to expand curative services in crisis situations while eroding the broad public's confidence in the health system as a whole.

For these reasons the European Network*, People's Health Movement, EPSU*, Alter Summit and Medact urge our local, national, European and global policymakers to undertake immediate action to protect our public health.

The crisis we are witnessing today illustrates what we are fighting for every 7th April, the European Day of action Against the Commercialization of Health and Social Protection and People's Health Day: a strong, solidarity-based health system accessible for all.

On the 7th of April and after, whether it will be through actions on the streets, in our hospitals, through social media, or in the press, we urge our decision-makers to ensure that our health system and our health workers are capable of answering the needs of the population through a strong universal public health system that will be protected from lucrative logics and the appetites of commercial companies.

Even before this health crisis, public and non-market services could no longer meet the needs of the population due to a lack of resources. And commercial players are entering the "market" to fill the void created by this policy. These commercial services offer more expensive services to the customers who can pay more for them. This means that wealthier citizens can afford fast, regular, quality care. Others have to make do with the care that under-funded public and non-market services can still offer.

What we need is fast, free and quality medical care accessible for all. In its absence, the death rate due to this virus, COVID-19, will continue to increase dramatically.

In the medium and longer term, increased public spending on health and increased investment in public and non-commercial health are crucial, not only to reverse years of underspending in many countries but also to ensure that health staff and facilities can cope with future demands. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, Europe had a shortfall of around one million health workers.

On the 6th of March, at the Social Dialogue of Hospitals at the European Commission in Brussels, trade unions highlighted their concern about the health of health workers and the

lack of protocols and safety materials. Private commercial companies are taking advantage of scarcity during this outbreak and are selling basic medical safety material to the highest bidder, while introducing fear within the population.

The World Health Organization calls for strict control measures, including the tracking and isolation of people who have been in contact with patients. If several countries did not follow this recommendation fast enough, it is primarily due to a lack of personnel and resources in the health sector but also short term national economic interests. As a consequence people from Europe have contributed to spreading the virus to countries, such as on the African continent, that have weaker health care systems due to inadequate surveillance and laboratory capacity, scarcity of public health human resources, and limited financial means.

Everywhere, workers in health care institutions are exposed much more than the general public and take a particular kind of risk in continuing on the frontlines of this outbreak. In Italy, 5% of diagnosed cases of COVID-19 are health workers. As frontline workers, their position is vulnerable to begin with, and it is made worse by the consequences of the onslaught of austerity measures and budget cuts that public health care systems in Europe have suffered during the last decade.

In many cases, for example in Italy, caps on employment that were implemented in order to reduce expenditures have led to a deficit of health workers in the public system. In response to these shortages, some countries have resorted to employing health workers who have already retired. This not only demonstrates the unpreparedness of our health systems to respond to people's needs, but also puts the health of retired health workers themselves at risk. In other countries, such as Belgium, shortages of basic protective equipment are cause for serious concern: if such shortages are occurring in core EU countries, it should be frightening to imagine to what extent they might grow in periphery countries where public health systems have been drained even more.

It is crucial for us to acknowledge the extremely important role health workers are playing in addressing this coronavirus disease outbreak and support them and their trade unions in their requests for safe staffing ratios and the provision of adequate protective equipment.

Because healthy, quality services start with sufficient funding...

Because a population can only be healthy if market forces are thwarted...

Because access to health means guaranteeing financial, geographical, temporal and cultural accessibility for all...

Because health democracy is essential...

Because 75% of our health depends on the social, environmental and gender conditions we live in...

Because medicines policy must be at the service of the population and not at the service of transnational pharmaceutical companies...

Because our health, our caregivers, our hospitals are in danger...

LET US FIGHT TOGETHER FOR A STRONG UNIVERSAL PUBLICLY FUNDED HEALTH SYSTEM CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH HEALTH CRISES TODAY AND TOMORROW

On 7 April, for the 5th year in a row, we organize decentralized actions all over Europe for the European Day of Action Against the Commercialization of Health and People's Health Day throughout the world.

We have decided to cancel all physical gatherings and actions. We call on every citizen to show their support for our call to "spread solidarity, not the virus" with a "white sheet" action on 7 April:

- 1. Write your message on a white sheet and hang it in a visible place**
- 2. Take pictures of it**
- 3. Share your pictures on social media with the hashtag #health4all**

Finally, we extend our sincere gratitude to the health care workers who are dedicating their lives to help those affected and send our condolences to the friends and family of those who have passed away.

- The European Network against the commercialization and privatization of health and social protection - <http://europe-health-network.net/>
- People's Health Movement Europe - <https://phmovement.org/>
- European Public Service Union (EPSU)
- Alter Summit (www.altersummit.eu)
- Medact

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