Future of Health in the EU

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The European Society of Radiology (ESR) welcomes the European Commission’s commitment to continue investments in EU health policies under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which was adopted by the European Commission on May 2, 2018. In the midst of the debate on the future of the EU, stakeholders and the EU institutions should more than ever collaborate to address common challenges in the field of health that cannot be dealt with at member state level alone.

After the release of the general budget proposal, the European Commission published a specific proposal for a restructured European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for all funding aimed at ‘investing in people’, also integrating the previously independent EU Health Programme. With the proposal, the European Commission reinforces its long-time ambition to cut through silos and increase alignment and synergies between policy areas, a step in the right direction that many health stakeholders including the ESR have been advocating for years. The ESF+ also aims at better linking EU social and health policies with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

From the point of view of health stakeholders, the alignment can contribute to better targeted EU action in the field of health, on the condition that health continues to have equal priority to other policy areas. In addition to investing in health prevention and promotion and enhancing the resilience of national health systems, a strong health programme is essential to streamline the implementation of EU legislation in the field of health, i.e. the Medical Devices Regulation, the Cross-Border Healthcare Directive, and EU cooperation on Health Technology Assessment.

The proposed integration of the EU Health Programme in the ESF+ takes the form of a dedicated ‘health strand’, through which the Commission hopes to better align health spending with other policy areas. In total, the European Commission pledged to make available €413 billion for health, which marks a slight decrease in funding for health compared to the current health programme. In view of restrained national health budgets, EU institutions and the member states are called on to spend more, not less, on health in the next EU budget to guarantee qualitative delivery of care and the ambitious goals set out in the health strand.

The digital transformation of healthcare systems requires common EU-wide initiatives in order to improve interoperability to the benefit of clinical practice and research. In line with recent initiatives to scale up digitalisation of healthcare services, the European Commission has proposed the launch of the flagship programme ‘Digital Europe’ to enhance digital capacities across the EU. In the area of health, the ‘Digital Europe’ programme will support the deployment of a European exchange format for electronic health records, among other initiatives. In coordination with activities under the ESF+ health strand, the ‘Digital Europe’ programme should accelerate healthcare systems’ adaption to digital innovation, further boosting interoperability of healthcare IT systems and health data.

Considering the continued investment in health at the EU level, the ESR supports stakeholder calls to maintain a Directorate-General responsible for health (DG SANTE), operating under the political leadership of the Commissioner for Health, in order to implement the ESF+ health strand. This is essential to ensure that health continues to have equal priority to other policy areas. The integration of the health programme in the ESF+ should moreover result in closer coordination between the DG SANTE and other Directorates-General that are instrumental in the formulation of health policies. The ESR welcomes better alignment between policy areas within the European Commission and considers the new approach conducive to implementing the ‘Health in all Policies’ approach.

The ESR looks forward to working together with the EU institutions in the definition and implementation of the new policy initiatives in the field of health to improve clinical practice, patient safety, and research.