



EU action to combat health inequalities

The EU is showing an increased interest in health inequalities. This led to the recent inclusion of a specific health equity objective within the new Health Strategy and Public Health Programme. A Communication on Solidarity in Health was adopted by the European Commission in October of last year.

Recent studies carried out throughout Europe show that persons with least access to economic and social resources tend to suffer most from health problems. It is often stated that current socio-economic inequalities in health are unacceptable and that this issue represents one of Europe's greatest challenges. Some of the factors revealed from these studies show that:

- people with a lower level of education, a lower occupational class, or a lower level of income tend to die at a younger age,

and to have a higher prevalence of most types of health problems;

- many persons in the new EU member states tend to live a shorter life than their counterparts;
- socio-economic inequalities in health-life years can amount to more than 10 years for men and almost five years for women;
- language may be a barrier to accessing healthcare by ethnic and religious minorities in several member states, including Malta.

The influence of the EU on policies for health and health services has, as a result, increased significantly in recent years. It is now contributing more through support and coordination of the member states' actions in this area and by raising awareness of health inequalities within the member states.



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