

Public Health

The legal basis of the Health policy is Article 152 of the Treaty establishing the European Community. In a world where people regularly travel between countries and continents, threats to the health of EU citizens from communicable diseases cannot be quarantined within national borders. Diseases caused by smoking, poor nutrition or pollution are a matter of concern in all EU countries.

While the primary responsibility for health care lies with member states, the EU can help address these challenges more effectively.

The public health programmeThe EU is spending some €50 million annually from 2003 to 2008. The priorities include strategies for dealing with the impact on health of nutrition, physical activity, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, genetic factors, age and gender.

Disease prevention and control

For some time now, the EU has recognised that it needs to improve its ability to protect its citizens against communicable diseases and bio-terrorism threats. The EU is equipped to monitor the spread of a virus – be it SARS or just influenza - but not to act in a coordinated fashion to stop it spreading. A European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control started work in May 2005 in Stockholm, strives to change that. By creating a central agency to replace the current informal networking arrangements, the EU will be able to react faster – and acting fast can make the difference between a minor outbreak and a serious epidemic.

The environment and health

Between one quarter and one third of illness and disease in industrial countries is the result of environmental factors. A new strategy launched in mid-2003 will make a start on tackling some environmental factors responsible for public health problems. The priorities for 2004-2010 have been incorporated in an Environment and Health Action Plan.

Smoking and health

The EU is also pro-active in combating smoking. EU governments have agreed to ban most forms of tobacco advertising and event sponsorship by tobacco companies no later than 1 August 2005. EU rules already limit the use of additives and addictive substances, make health warnings compulsory, forbid misleading claims, and set maximum levels of tar, carbon monoxide and nicotine in cigarettes.

Drugs and health

The EU's action plan to combat drugs complements the fight against drug trafficking and drug-related crime through EU policy on justice and home affairs. EU aims to reduce substantially the use of illegal drugs, including "ecstasy", heroin and amphetamines, and to combat drug-related diseases (such as hepatitis C, tuberculosis, and HIV/Aids) and drug-related deaths. The watchwords are prevention, education and awareness.

Access to medical treatment everywhere

The right to travel freely, or to live and work anywhere in the EU, would make no sense if EU citizens could not be sure of obtaining health care wherever they go. Mutual recognition of social security rights ensures that health care is readily available for anyone falling ill while in another member state, and in some other European countries as well. The European health insurance card makes it easier for business travellers and holidaymakers to claim these rights. Phase-in of this card began on 1 June 2004.

Public Health
