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Informal Meeting of Health Ministers at the Grand Master's Palace

Improved voluntary collaboration between Member States particularly in enhancing access to innovative technologies and medicines for rare diseases, and facilitating structured mobility of medical specialists will improve access to highly specialised services for all European citizens irrespective where they reside.

Today, Minister for Health, Chris Fearne chaired the Informal Meeting of Health Ministers in Valletta as the President of the Council of Health Ministers. This meeting was very well attended with 20 European Ministers. Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis and the Regional Director of WHO (Europe) Zsusanna Jakab, also participated in the meeting.

The meeting discussed the thematic priorities that the Maltese Presidency has selected namely Childhood Obesity, HIV and Structured Cooperation between Health Systems. Childhood obesity and HIV are posing a challenge to the health status of European citizens with a direct effect on the economy. The need to address the HIV epidemic in the European Union as an ongoing challenge in the wider European region is also an important public health concern. Improved voluntary collaboration between Member States particularly in enhancing access to innovative technologies and medicines for rare diseases, and facilitating structured mobility of medical specialists will improve access to highly specialised services for all European citizens irrespective where they reside.

Minister Fearne highlighted how stepping up voluntary cooperation in areas where there are clear seeking synergies and European added value is a valid approach to address the above mentioned challenges. Finding new models of collaboration for public health and health systems within the European Union that avoid a 'one size fits all' approach whilst enabling steady progress to be made, is of utmost importance within the current context on the debate of the Future of Europe.

A mid-term evaluation of the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020 has revealed that Member States have been more active in certain action areas compared to others. The meeting sought to establish the willingness of European countries to engage in areas where action had stalled including food labelling and taxation, marketing and the empowerment of families and to share practical experiences on this matter. The Ministers discussed how can adequate supply of a healthy diet to children be ensured through multiple instruments. Ministers agreed that a multisectoral approach is required

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to tackle the rising trend in childhood obesity. They also discussed how the European Commission can support a cross border approach to address this challenge.

Member states also discussed the possibility of a voluntary structured cooperation approach in order to facilitate access to expensive innovative health technologies. The need to work together on Horizon Scanning to be better prepared for the impact of innovation on health systems and to monitor and evaluate the effects of these therapies once they are being used in real life.

Ministers also expressed their views on voluntary structured cooperation to facilitate cross border post-graduate medical training in innovative or highly specialised services. The value of such an approach is to build capacity throughout the EU in the context of uneven availability of medical expertise throughout the EU.

Ministers also discussed how concerted action at EU level could be escalated in order to fast track actions on HIV and to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 thereby exploring ways of keeping this objective high on the European and global agenda. Whilst many MS have strategies for action, it was agreed that more action is required. They also voiced their concerns on the costs of newer forms of treatment and the measures that could be taken to reduce such costs. Member states were supportive of the technical Malta Declaration on HIV.

On the other hand, Commissioner Andriukaitis highlighted the importance of enhanced cooperation between Member States to keep European public health high on the EU agenda. He also made reference to the gaps highlighted in the mid-term evaluation of the EU Childhood Obesity action plan. He also acknowledged that HIV is indeed a concern on which actions needs to be fast-tracked with a great sense of urgency.

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