



# Sveriges Konsumenter i Samverkan

Swedish Consumer Coalition

Stockholm and Hultsfred 2004-10-15

**European Commission  
DG SANCO**

**Comments to**

**“The future of Health in Europe - An overview of strategies for better health”**

We agree with the concerns of Commissioner David Byrne and others in raising the level of health and productivity for all people in Europe. We share the WHO definition of health: **Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.**

The issues of health and disease are complex and will require a multi-faceted and coordinated strategy in order to move forward. We especially appreciate the paper's sentence: **We need to understand how different socio-economic and environmental factors affect health. And then we need to make all these factors work together for good health. Good health must become a driving force behind all policy-making.**

By tradition health care systems have had a function of protecting and helping citizens in a situation of need, illness or accident, without a particular and previous self-engagement. However lifestyle- and protective health issues are not as evident a need for everyone. It is of utmost importance to find new ways to interest and engage the citizens to participate in preventive life styles and to involve them and engage them in a completely new way. It is therefore important to engage and involve consumer organisations as they have a high grade of confidence and their messages have more the character of good councils than former used methods with a character of fostering citizens.

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There will be an enormous gain, for the society, our common economy and the individual citizen, if we could succeed to change the extremely dangerous effects of the commercial impact on the life styles and increase the interest for more healthy and economic life styles and consumption patterns.

The following is an overview of some of the key points that we see must be evaluated and addressed in order to move forward in a constructive way. Each point is important and needs a thorough analyze and **step by step executed strategy**. The major areas of focus should be the following and each major area has many important subtopics, some of which we will address, as lifestyle, public hygiene, the spread of infectious diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, addictive substances, drug research, medical devices, food and water quality, environmental issues, domestic violence, education on safety and lifestyle, health care, acute care, disease care and Complementary and Alternative Medicine therapies, CAM. Each issue will here be examined.

- Lifestyle issues must be at the forefront of policymaking. A link is made with tobacco consumption and alcohol abuse. In fact 34 % European citizens are smokers and 25 % regularly drink alcohol by personal choice, but even more (38 %) feel stressed and we may hardly imagine there is no relationship between those three data, on one hand, and between the alarming stress rate and non health policies – i.e. collective choices – on the other. Stress may originate out of many reasons.

As consumer representatives, we know people are more and more concerned about protective processes and immaterial content of products that they buy, and by the effects (increasing inequalities, for instance) current consumption patterns have.

Obesity is mentioned also as a risk factor: if prevention is the way to save the community millions of euros, **health care food** - wholesome food with no pesticides, healthy processing methods and natural process additives and no GE - together with the way all people have access to it (informing people is not enough!) should have been highlighted, but it was not!

Sport practicing is on the prevention side. Exercising at least twice a week is a healthy lifestyle Eurostat indicator. We really wish the actual figure to be improved. Findings on the motivation people have for the lifestyle they actually carry on may be crucial to understanding and facing the social costs. Here is another topic for important research.

- Public hygiene is a basic right that all Europeans should enjoy. Public hygiene is the major cause of the increase in life expectancy in the U.S. and Europe the last century. All Europeans must be provided with shelter, clean water and food. These are basic necessities that all must

have. There is a clear correlation between poverty and early mortality. This is not least important for the ageing population, whose health threats are knowingly linked with solitude conditions causing under nourishment, mental disease, mistreatment and even suicide. There is also a clear correlation between greater economic independence and education and living longer.

- We agree with the efforts of creating the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control mentioned in Byrnes paper. This could be used to prevent and contain infectious diseases.
- A coordinated effort must be continued with the respect of sex education, the use of contraceptives and the containment and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.
- The area of mental health needs to have a strategy that encompasses prevention, social aspects, early detection and different levels of treatment and care. Guidelines should be put forth to improve mental health in the family, schools, workplace, the unemployed, those who have had traumatic experiences of various kinds.
- A clear policy needs to be worked out on addictive substances. Recreational drugs, smoking, chewing tobacco and alcohol abuse are the major areas. Sweden has over the last decades decreased the smoking rates to less than 20%, the lowest in Europe. This has contributed to longer health and lower health care costs. There must be a more concerted effort in the schools in Europe to provide educational programs, films, etc that will keep the kids from getting hooked in the first place. The governments must also exert more aggressive campaigns to help people stop smoking and put more bans on smoking in public places. Other addictions must also have a clear strategy for prevention and treatment.
- Better coordination of efforts, and to bring better, cheaper and safer pharmaceuticals into the market place. The cost of medication is a huge burden on the health care system. The main way to decrease this cost is: a) more effort in prevention and lifestyle changes so that less drugs are needed. b) more efficient and cost effective drug development, registration costs and regulation c) limiting monopolies, powers and profits by the drug companies, which are the most profitable industries on the planet, d) decreasing drug interactions and side effects which are a major economic burden and cause of death, e) encouraging the use of complementary and alternative medicine therapies (CAM therapies) which most often incur less expenses and risks than do pharmaceutical care. The promotion and safety of new medical devices and technology for better health care and lower costs should be supported.
- Better quality and more nutritious foods. Good nutrition is a foundation for health. Coordinated efforts to decrease the risk for bacteria, mould, mad cow disease, GMO and other threats to the food supply. Food

poisoning is still killing and harming too many people in Europe. The overuse of antibiotics and drugs in animals which is later passed on to the consumer is a concern. Conventional farming practices with the overuse of herbicides and pesticides and the lack of minerals in the soils is a major concern and cause of disease. More support and emphasis on ecological farming practices must be supported and promoted. The fast food culture is replacing traditional nutritional meals served in homes. This is also threatening the health of Europeans. Fast foods do not give the nutritional foundation needed for health. The new film Super Size me emphasises this. See [www.supersizeme.com](http://www.supersizeme.com). We must work hard to make better and more nutritious fast foods, emphasize home cooked meals and decrease the overuse of sugar, aspartame, sodas, white flour products and trans fatty acids which are a major threat to the health of the people. Education in the schools and on all levels must emphasise the importance of whole foods and good nutrition. Obesity is as big a killer as smoking is and it is increasing at an alarming rate especially in children. Obesity leads to diabetes, heart disease and many other diseases including early death. Obesity must be fought and the major efforts should be in activating and educating both adults and children and promoting good nutrition. A tax on junk food and tax incentives on whole foods is one of many good ways to promote good nutrition. Promoting the drinking of pure water is also very important for health.

- A cleaner environment is a key to future health. Citizens are exposed to way too many heavy metals, hydrocarbons, chemicals and additives. The sources are not only from the air, soil, industry, automobiles, airplanes, offices, homes but also from shampoos, cosmetics, amalgam fillings, etc. A strong policy promoting a cleaner and safer environment outside, in the workplace and at home is important. Automobiles and public transportation must decrease its dependency on oil products and dirty sources of fuel. More promotion and access must come for cleaner fuels and a cleaner environment. Heavy metals and chemicals stored in our tissues are carcinogenic and contribute to hormone problems, cancer and various diseases and learning difficulties for children in school.
- More must be done to prevent alcohol abuse and domestic violence. The rights of women and children must be promoted in all the EU countries. Incest, child abuse, domestic abuse and other violations to a safe and loving family atmosphere must be fought. All EU citizens have a right to be raised in a safe and loving family environment. Promotion of this will greatly decrease crime and mental illness in the future.
- The day care and school system must incorporate teaching on good nutrition, exercise, respect, etc to promote health attitudes and habits that will create healthy children and decrease racist and psychological abuse of children. Lifestyle factors are the major cause of chronic diseases and

there should be programs in place to promote healthy lifestyles in the homes, schools and workplaces. Activity and sports should be supported. More bicycle paths, sports and activities facilities should be promoted. The best way to cut down on health care costs tomorrow is by starting to build health today, especially starting with the parents, children and schools.

- The health care system should more quickly adapt to technologies for earlier and better screenings and health care checkups. Catching health problems earlier and treating them with lifestyle changes is much cheaper than using heroic and expensive procedures such as triple bypass surgeries, transplantations, etc.
- Coordinate support and sharing of new technology and training for acute care in our hospitals.
- Disease care in the hospital and nursing homes should be investigated. Improving hygiene, activating patients, decreasing the spread of infections, medication interactions, overmedication, and medical mistakes will save money and lives.
- CAM (Complementary and Alternative medicine) therapies have become more and more popular the last decades. **CAM therapies emphasize personal responsibility for ones health and promote health lifestyle changes.** Over one third of the Swedish citizens pay out of pocket for CAM therapies. It is of great value to make use of that demonstrated free will and to encourage it. This must be promoted and supported by the EU! Restrictive registration costs and legislation threatens to decrease the availability of CAM therapies and remedies. Research support must be given to these therapies and not just drug development. Too many restrictions and a lack of support of research and rights have come the last few years to limit the use of CAM therapies and remedies. Many of these therapies such as massage and herbal medicine have been around for thousands of years. The use of herbal medicine is still the largest form of medical care in the developing countries. Herbal medicine, homeopathy, nutritional supplements and other natural remedies have a long track record of safety and should therefore be supported by the EU.
- Representatives of consumers must be put in place on all the major decision making bodies in the EU that work on health care issues. Also representation from the CAM experts must be included in this work to have a more open minded discussion.

**A growing amount of consumers want the right to decide more by themselves and also take more responsibility for own life and health! In a future and successful work for better health, this growing engagement must be welcomed, taken care of and more stimulated instead of counteracted by**

**regulations and limitations with the only scope to protect traditional cure and medicines.**

An open minded approach to these issues and setting up goals, new policies and a more developed cooperation between all stakeholders will ensure more success from the efforts to improve the health situation for the European citizens.

Sveriges Konsumenter I Samverkan / Swedish Consumer Coalition

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