European health policy: where now?

Martin McKee*

The rejection of the proposed European constitution by voters in two of the original six member states, France and The Netherlands, has brought to the surface a wide range of concerns about the future direction of Europe. These include, among many others, Europe’s ability to speak with one voice in a world increasingly dominated by the United States; the scope of any future enlargement of the European Union, in particular the possible accession of Turkey; how best to enhance Europe’s global competitiveness while not undermining its social protection systems; and how to spend the European Union’s budget, which continues to be dominated by agricultural subsidies. Faced with all of these profound political questions, some might excuse the governments of member states if they allowed health policy to slip down the political agenda. Yet this would be unfortunate as there are many pressing issues that need to be addressed.

Many aspects of contemporary European health policy flow from the Lisbon Agenda, agreed by member states in March 2000, which seeks to make the European Union ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010’ (http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index_en.htm). Underpinning this agenda is a growing recognition of the synergistic relationship between health and wealth. While it has long been recognized that wealth is a major determinant of population health, the work of the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health showed, at least for poorer countries, that good health was an important driver of economic growth.¹ A European Commission report has now assembled the evidence for rich countries.² Among its key findings are that a country’s current economic status is to a considerable extent a reflection of the health gains it has achieved in the past and that individuals in good health are more likely to participate in the labour force, to invest in their own education, to earn more, and to delay retirement. The overall conclusion is that countries do not face a choice between investment in health and investment in the economy but rather the question of how they can do both in a way that creates a mutually reinforcing upward spiral. The public health article in the Treaty of Maastricht made provision in a way that creates a mutually reinforcing upward spiral. The economic article in the Treaty of Maastricht made provision in a way that creates a mutually reinforcing upward spiral. The possible accession of Turkey; how best to enhance Europe’s global competitiveness while not undermining its social protection systems; and how to spend the European Union’s budget, which continues to be dominated by agricultural subsidies.

As this brief and inevitably highly selective overview shows, there is an extensive European health policy agenda. This raises the question of whether it can be delivered. Contrary to what is often said by some politicians and journalists, the European Commission works with extremely limited resources. Can Europe’s politicians give the institutions of the European Union the resources they need? The European Centre for Disease Control, recently opened in Stockholm, provides a test case. It has the potential to make a real difference, tackling long-standing weaknesses in communicable disease surveillance and control,⁶ but only if there is investment in both high-calibre staff at the centre and in effective systems within member states on which it can draw.

The uncertainty at the heart of Europe creates many difficulties. However, it also offers opportunities for Europe’s public health community to make its voice heard.

References


Correspondence: Martin McKee, Professor of European Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK e-mail: martin.mckee@lshtm.ac.uk


