Covid-19: Underfunding of health workforce left many European nations vulnerable, says commission

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Many health systems in Europe have suffered “chronic underfunding and underinvestment in the health workforce,” which left them struggling to cope with the covid-19 pandemic, an independent commission has concluded.

In a report published on Tuesday 16 March the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, convened by the World Health Organization, urged European leaders to “learn the lessons from this crisis” and implement change accordingly.

“We cannot achieve a sustainable future for health and development in Europe if we fail to address the conditions that allowed the covid-19 pandemic to inflict unprecedented damage on lives and economies,” it said.

In its report the commission, chaired by Italy’s former prime minister Mario Monti, praised the “phenomenal efforts made by the health and social care workforce” in tackling covid-19. But it said that sustained underfunding and underinvestment in the health workforce, “often as a legacy of the 2008 financial crisis,” had left many health systems less resilient.

The commission said, “We endorse the importance of investing in health and health systems as a foundation of societal cohesion and wellbeing, which in turn will support economic growth.

“Evidence based investments in health systems, especially primary care, public health and mental health, have repeatedly demonstrated value for money and should form the core of health system strengthening going forward.”

Universal coverage

The report also urged European governments to take action “at all levels of societies” to tackle inequalities exposed by the pandemic. Health systems should become more inclusive by ensuring that “everyone, whatever their characteristics, is able to participate in decision-making at all levels and to obtain access to health and social services,” it said.

Governments should also re-emphasise the sustainable development goal of achieving universal health coverage, which “is key to ensuring societal cohesion, economic growth and, ultimately, sustainable societies,” it added.

To aid future pandemic preparedness European nations should collaborate to establish an Intergovernmental Panel on Health Threats, the report recommended, to assess risks and propose solutions to problems arising from human activities—such as climate change, emerging zoonotic infections, and antimicrobial resistance—and should invest more in measures to reduce threats, provide early warning systems, and improve responses.

In parallel, the G20 should set up a new Global Health Board of health, economic, financial, and other policy experts to identify vulnerabilities that threaten human, animal, and environmental health, it added, and governments should work together to coordinate and accelerate clinical trials to reduce delays and improve efficiency.

Martin McKee, professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and chair of the commission’s Scientific Advisory Board, said, “We always talk about the upstream determinants of health, but we never seem to get to them.

“My fellow commissioners, who include former heads of government, central bankers, and others, bring a wealth of expertise on the big questions facing our societies. I’ve been really struck by their commitment to make the world a better place, engaging with issues that we in the health community should have tackled long ago but didn’t.”

The commission will publish its final report in September 2021.


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