


A Europe that cares, prepares, protects

Health priorities of the Belgian presidency of the
Council of the European Union





The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU comes in the first half of 2024 and at the end of the von der Leyen Commission's term of office. We see this as an ideal opportunity to contribute to Europe's health agenda for the next term (2024-2029).

In this context, Belgium will focus on three major themes during its Presidency: care, preparedness and protection. Through this lens, we will work with the Member States, the European Parliament and the Commission on policy proposals that can further strengthen the European Health Union and protect the wellbeing of EU citizens.




Table of contents

Introduction.....	4
A Europe that cares.....	5
A Europe that prepares	5
A Europe that protects.....	6

Introduction

The Belgian Council Presidency will come at the end of the 2019-2024 legislative cycle. It will therefore aim to finish ongoing trilogues, notably on the EU Health Data Space. Furthermore, it will seek to move forward the negotiations for the EU pharmaceutical legislation, the recommendation on vaccine preventable cancers and the recommendation for a smoke free environment.

Moreover, the Presidency will strive to give shape to the health agenda for the next European Commission. With a broad view and a series of concrete policy proposals, we want to enrich the European health agenda for the future, an agenda that puts the health of our population at the centre in a time where (health) security is no longer a given. Thus, we will have to argue firmly as health ministers that health should remain high on Europe's agenda. With the Belgian Presidency we want to give the EU a boost in that sense.

And lastly, we also want to strengthen the overarching instruments the EU has at its disposal to implement (non-binding) EU policies. The current EU funding framework offers opportunities for investing in health that could be more strategically used as a part of the EU health policy and its operationalization. The Belgian presidency sees the opportunity to make innovative proposals on the existing European instruments to foster EU action in this area. Notably, improving the functioning of the EU joint actions under the EU4Health programme and accessing EU funding for health will be part of the focus.

Under the slogan "**a Europe that cares, prepares and protects**", Belgium will work with the Member States, the European Parliament and the Commission on health policy proposals that can further strengthen the European Health Union and protect the wellbeing of EU citizens.

Let us drive you through the main topics that our slogan encompasses!

A Europe that cares

How can the EU support Member States in ensuring availability of sufficient **health workforce** with the right skills to sustain their health care systems? What is the skill mix we need? Which function differentiation? The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU wants to discuss the role of the EU in addressing these challenges, including the impact of the Professional Qualifications Directive on the organisation of health care professions.

Furthermore, Belgium wants to launch a discussion on public incentives for medical research and innovation. These are currently not always addressing the highest medical needs for our patients and society. Therefore, a shift towards a **needs-driven system** is needed. To this end, we intend to propose a common methodology to identify and assess unmet needs and define priorities in an evidence-based manner.

Finally, we want to continue to work of previous presidencies on the **prevention of non-communicable diseases**. In that sense, our country will organise a stock taking exercise on the Europe Beating Cancer plan, which could lead to a call to continue action addressing non-communicable diseases.

A Europe that prepares

The adoption of the EU Health Union legal package and the creation of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) are among the EU's biggest initiatives in health emergency preparedness. Yet the work related to health emergency preparedness is only starting and we need to reflect what priorities we need to tackle in this area in the upcoming years. The Belgian Council Presidency will therefore do a stock taking exercise of the post-pandemic **EU health emergency governance framework**.

Moreover, Belgium will also look to expand the EU's **capacity to conduct large scale clinical trials**. During the pandemic, WHO recorded over 18,000 COVID-19 clinical trials, the vast majority (95%) of which are thought to have contributed nothing to the evidence base due to failure to complete enrolment or poor design features. An unprecedented number of academic clinical trials have also been launched in the EU to speed up COVID-19

treatment and prevention. Despite these efforts, a lack of coordination across Member States resulted in a chaotic landscape with numerous underpowered trials that could not provide meaningful results and a duplication of research activities. The Presidency will work on the development of concrete actions for strengthening the European ecosystem for public clinical trial platforms.

Besides, our country will continue the work of the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies on **antimicrobial resistance** (AMR). ECDC estimates that 35.000 people die each year in the EU from antimicrobial-resistant infections. We intend to discuss the EU's AMR governance, the implementation of effective, results-driven, policy measures to optimise use of antibiotics, how to stimulate the R&D of new antibiotics and sustainable access to existing ones.

A Europe that protects

The EU has also been confronted with severe medicines shortages over the past few years, with studies indicating that notifications increased by 60% between 2017 and 2019 alone. To address the issue, 23 countries supported a non-paper that proposes three measures to help relieve the worst effects of shortages on patients, as well as provide a more structural answer to the underlying causes, namely: 1) a **voluntary solidarity mechanism** to address acute shortages, 2) a **European list of critical medicines** whose supply, production and value chains must be monitored, and 3) a **Critical Medicines Act** to strengthen Europe's manufacturing base for critical medicines and reduce dependencies and market consolidations. This resulted in a Communication by the Commission on addressing medicine shortages in the EU. It's implementation will also be discussed during the Belgian Presidency.