

25 YEARS OF PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCACY IN EUROPE

*Taking stock and
looking ahead*

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On 28 June 2018, EPHA celebrated its 25th anniversary in a festive gathering that brought together EPHA member organisations, policymakers as well as many of the partners and faces from many sectors that helped shape the Alliance over the last quarter of a century. The event provided an opportunity to reminisce about past challenges and achievements, but it was also a chance to take a firm look into the future given the ongoing problems posed for public health by ageing and demographic change, the need to use public finances as effectively as possible, growing health and income inequalities and threats to healthcare related to globalisation.

EPHA was formed in 1993 by a small group of health NGOs - the European Bureau for Action on Smoking Prevention, Alzheimer Europe, the Netherlands Consumer Platform; and the UK Public Health Alliance – who recognised the need for coordinated efforts to respond to new legislation giving Europe a greater role in health protection following the development of the single market and the approval of the Maastricht Treaty, the first European treaty to have an article on health, with a focus on health determinants, giving Europe an unequivocal legal competence in health policy.

The idea that governmental or EU policy could influence and improve people's health status was a new concept, in the

institutions as well as among NGOs. Similarly, "public health" was often equated with public health services, or health care organisations in the public rather than the private sector. Ensuring good health was often seen as being determined by individual behaviour, and policy development was often limited to health services. One of EPHA's first tasks was to highlight the connections between other policies and health: eg the links between poor air quality and respiratory diseases; or between trade policy and non-communicable diseases and the need for health policy to be mainstreamed into all aspects of public policy making, summarized in the phrase "health in all policies."



Looking back over the last 25 years

EPHA co-founder Andrew Hayes recalled that EPHA had been established before Europe's competence in public health was defined. Following the creation of a European health programme on cancer prevention and patient information, in which former French president Mitterrand and UK PM Thatcher had been instrumental in establishing Mr Hayes spoke of some of the individuals who had been influential in shaping EPHA, and also by extension European public health policy, in Brussels. This included a number of supportive activists working on tobacco control, cancer and diabetes, as well as MEPs from around Europe - including John Bowen (UK) - which eventually led to setting up an Intergroup in the European Parliament. While initial EPHA members were mainly based in the UK and in Southern Europe, EPHA seized the opportunity to expand its reach following the 2003 and 2007 accession of Member States located in Eastern Europe, with an increasing focus on health inequalities and access to healthcare. Mr Hayes also talked about some of the battles EPHA had fought with health-harmful industries, always emerging stronger from the experience.

EPHA President Emeritus Archie Turnbull, who has had a close relationship with the Alliance since its inception, recalled that EPHA has always put the health of people first, noting that its roots lay in the European Citizens Action

Service. Despite many obstacles, EPHA has always found a way to convene the different members of the public health community and unite them to tackle important challenges, the Tobacco Products Directive and the recognition, after many years campaigning that the EU's food and agriculture policy should pay a better role in ensuring good health and nutrition being among the most



important "wins" for the health sector. He also welcomed the passionate engagement of young public health leaders, who had expressed their perspectives of the future of health in Europe at a panel discussion during EPHA's Annual General Assembly on the same day.

One of the first Secretary Generals of EPHA, **Genon Jenson** (now Executive

“It has been a pleasure to work with so many people and organisations committed to protecting and improving public health. We have much to be proud of, but still much to do, and EPHA’ will



continue to have a vital voice in tackling the challenges we face.”

**Archie Turnbull
EPHA President Emeritus**

Director of the Health and Environment Alliance) recalled some of her highlights working for EPHA, reflecting the growing involvement of Europe in global health processes, which were also significant firsts for the organisation: representing public health on the official NGO delegation attending the WTO Seattle trade negotiations in 1999; participating in the World Health Organization environment and health policy activities;

and contributing to the historic WHO publication highlighting the evidence of environmental determinants on children's health across chemicals, water, air and transport. She also recalled EPHA's efforts to secure operational funding from the EU for health NGOs, greatly increasing their capacity to participate, provide expertise and contribute to the improvement of EU health policy.

“Congratulations to EPHA for its amazing work and development throughout the years to put people’s health at the forefront of EU policymaking. As we face a backlash and loss of trust in the European project, and attacks on civil

society, we must be vigilant that the EU does not weaken our public health or environmental standards. Health is a key route to reconnecting with ordinary people.”



Genon Jensen
Executive Director, Health and Environment Alliance



Looking forward – the future for public health in Europe

What was a small group of health NGOs, advocates and academics has today developed into an organisation which represents over 80 members in 30 countries, including public health NGOs, patient and disease groups and health professionals, reflecting and bringing together different aspects of the public health community in Europe. It was remarked that EPHA's diverse membership has been its greatest strength, and EPHA's members have

relentlessly risen to the task of working to ensure better health for all in Europe, often in the face of opposition and adversity.

However, despite significant achievements in developing policies in public health promotion and prevention, many of the questions facing the embryonic organisation in 1993, still remain unanswered: How far should governments or the EU try to influence

people's health through public policy? What are the right levers to control the determinants which cause poor health, as governments face a concerning increase in the incidence of chronic diseases? How can growing health inequalities across Europe be tackled? How can we ensure that health is taken into account when agricultural or trade policies are being developed?

Looking forward, **Fiona Godfrey of the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL)** identified some of the challenges which had arisen over the last 25 years highlighting the therapeutic advances for patients which have also come with dramatic rises in the costs of medicines across Europe, questioning the sustainability of the healthcare systems on which millions of people depend. She mentioned the resurgence

of childhood infectious diseases such as measles, long thought consigned to the history books, and the even more concerning battle against antimicrobial resistance, where, because of inappropriate and over-use of antibiotics, standard treatments are becoming ineffective, and life-saving medical procedures are become life-threatening.

However, recalling the debate between young leaders in public health which had taken just before the start of the 25th anniversary celebrations, she highlighted their recommendations, which gave hope for the future, such as the growing power of the patient advocate, and the opportunities for greater collaboration between EPHA's membership and the potential to strengthen public health advocacy at national level.



“Indeed, EPHA, must remember to draw on the strength of our members, look these new challenges in the face, and look forward with equanimity to the next 25 years”



**Fiona Godfrey
Director of EU public
affairs, European
Association for the Study
of the Liver**





european public health alliance

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