

Regional Meeting of Faculties of Medicine's Deans

**Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina
21-22 March 2024**

ADDRESS BY DR HANS HENRY P. KLUGE, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO EUROPEAN REGION

Dear professor Skrbic, professor Svab, deans from medical schools, dear friends, health workers – hvala – for asking me to address you today.

COVID-19 underscored the importance of long-standing efforts to strengthen primary health care and essential public health functions, at the core of integrated health services so as to better achieve Universal Health Coverage.

I congratulate you on recognizing the need to support Family Medicine by strengthening Family Medicine education.

We at WHO/Europe are supporting Member States to strengthen primary health care as part of overall health system improvement.

We have developed a new strategy to do so, based on lessons learned from the pandemic.

Indeed, our 53 Member States reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening primary health care in 2021 – amid the pandemic – at the Seventy-first Session of the WHO/Europe Regional Committee, giving us a mandate to implement this new strategy under the leadership of Member States.

Last December, marked the 15th anniversary of the Tallinn Charter, another high-level conference was held – focusing on health systems trust and transformation.

These themes are particularly relevant when it comes to the Health Workforce; the “life-blood” of our health systems without whom we simply cannot succeed in healthcare delivery! Because health workers are losing trust in their health system and Deans and education establishments play a critical role to ignite the trust of young people in their care during the training.

COVID-19 revealed how insufficient the supply of health and care workers is across Europe; highlighted by the challenges of workforce shortages, and skills and geographic

maldistribution, particularly in PHC rural areas – aggravating the many challenges to maintaining essential health services.

The WHO/Europe report “Health and care workforce in Europe: time to act”, launched at the Seventy-second Session of our Regional Committee in 2022, highlighted ten urgent actions required to support a sustainable health workforce.

The “Framework for action on the health and care workforce in the WHO European Region 2023–2030” addresses how we will support Member States as they address the growing crisis.

The pandemic also laid bare the importance of the need to look after the psychosocial safety of our health work force!

We must invest in services to reduce mental ill-health and burnout, not just providing support services after the impact, but investing in prevention.

It may sound obvious, but a sick workforce cannot care for patients!

Yet in these testing times, we are experiencing a constantly shifting burden of disease including long-term co-morbidities and long-term care. Mental health. Non-communicable diseases.

At the same time, we are seeing constant increases in demand for services in our health systems, accompanied by a smaller pool of workers available.

Then, we have rapidly aging populations, including our health workers.

These factors and others besides contribute to dependency ratios across Europe that are becoming worse.

Currently in Europe there are around 3 health and care workers to every dependent! By 2050 this will be 1-point-7 to 1; those workers are being born now!

If we are to attract our fair share of those workers, we must give them an attractive place to work, we must invest in them and earn their trust!

But numbers are not enough, we must innovate. Optimizing performance and transforming health care systems to meet future needs. Transforming care to involve the patients. And building trust in technologically enabled and innovative health services. All of these are essential!

This means encouraging and driving innovation using technology and new ways of work; optimizing skills use through interdisciplinary and distance spanning working practices, maximizing the skills available where they are available.

Family medicine is a vital and important component of a thriving healthcare system, deserving of equal recognition alongside other medical disciplines.

I am always proud to say I myself am a family medical doctor.

This must be reflected in modernized training family practitioners and strengthened continuous professional development.

My dear friends, if we are to face future challenges, I encourage you to turn your thoughts and efforts to the youth.

Attract and train them to work as part of teams, to use all their skills, especially those who will work in rural, hard to reach and underserved areas.

Finally, I support and encourage you to achieve your ambitions. Full support!

- ✓ To enhance international collaboration and sharing knowledge and best practices;
- ✓ To promote research in family medicine; nationally and globally;
- ✓ To facilitate the exchange of teachers and students and support each other;
- ✓ To promote interdisciplinary learning, and
- ✓ To lend your collective expertise to policymakers to shape effective healthcare policies.

Friends and colleagues – in our world of today, at a time of multiple, mounting health emergencies and crises, our health systems are at a critical crossroads.

The work you do today will contribute strongly to shaping our health systems of tomorrow. Never underestimate the leverage you have – individually and collectively – to strengthen the foundation of health, and in so doing support WHO in our overarching vision of health for all.

I wish you good luck and rest assured, our full support. I hope to see you all very soon.

Hvala.