
EDITORIAL

Health information – backbone of public health

Zsuzsanna Jakab
WHO Regional Director for Europe



High-quality health information is the “backbone” of public health and the basis for strong decision-making on health-related matters. In the Regional Office for Europe and among our partners there is a widespread understanding that evidence, information and innovation should underpin all health policies, and that such policies should be monitored for their effectiveness. At the core of this commitment is the Action Plan to Strengthen the Use of Evidence, Information and Research for Policy-making in the WHO European Region (1), which was adopted by all 53 Member States of the European Region at the 66th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2016. It is the first action plan of its kind in any WHO region. The endorsement of the Action Plan by all Member States of the Region established broad political commitment to the implementation of a range of concrete actions at international and country level and assists Member States in taking forward the four areas of national health policy development outlined by the Action Plan:

1. strengthening national health information systems, including digital and e-health systems, harmonizing health indicators and improving health information in the European Region;
2. establishing and promoting national health research systems to support the setting of public health priorities;
3. increasing country capacities for the development of evidence-informed policies (knowledge translation); and
4. mainstreaming the use of evidence, information and research in the implementation of health policies.

All actions in this regard are being guided by the WHO European Health Information Initiative (EHII). EHII is a WHO network committed to improving the information that underpins health policies in the European Region (2). While most countries in the Region have a strong tradition of health reporting, health information across the Region is still fragmented and health information activities are not coordinated. For the last six years, EHII has therefore been playing a vital role in bringing together decision-makers to support the integration, harmonization and sharing of existing knowledge, expertise and good practices in health information, research and innovation. It has been growing steadily, recently reaching a membership of 41, most of them WHO Member States but also including international organizations such as the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. EHII is the coordinating force for health information in the Region. Its outputs are visible on our new Health Information Gateway, the Regional Office’s one-stop-shop for all matters pertaining to data, including the Health for All database and policy information, country information, and increasingly, qualitative and analytical content. The network also supports countries in the implementation of new and disruptive digital solutions in health information, such as big data, artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies.

The Action Plan has been developed to be aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Regional Office’s Health 2020 policy framework, which derived

evidence from many disciplines and sectors in order to provide a comprehensive framework for health policy development. Given the plethora of indicators and the increasing burden of reporting to international organizations placed on countries, the Member States of the Region have recently adopted a core set of indicators which combines the indicators for the SDGs, Health 2020 and the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020; this joint monitoring framework will substantially reduce the reporting burden for our Member States.

The Regional Office has embarked on implementation of its commitment to strengthening the generation of relevant and culturally appropriate evidence for health and well-being, including qualitative evidence. A recent Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report on the use of narrative research in the health sector (nominated for a British Medical Association medical book award in 2016) describes how narrative research can convey the individual experience of illness and well-being (3). When established techniques from the social sciences and humanities, such as narrative methods, are rigorously applied to ensure proper sampling and data analysis, qualitative health information can complement and sometimes challenge quantitative epidemiological evidence. We have documented our journey from the use of purely quantitative health information to the use of both quantitative and qualitative evidence in health and well-being in successive European health reports; the *European health report 2018* (4) describes how we plan to use qualitative evidence in policy-making in order to better monitor and report on challenging public health concepts such as well-being, empowerment and resilience. The report calls for “new evidence for the 21st century”.

The Action Plan to Strengthen the Use of Evidence, Information and Research for Policy-making in the WHO European Region proposes practical steps for implementing all the activities outlined above. It aims to ensure access to relevant health information and its analysis to support decision-making at the right time. Such information and analysis are already being provided in various forms, including the European health reports, WHO country profiles and highlights on health and well-being, the Evidence-informed Policy Network evidence for policy briefs, the HEN synthesis reports, the journal *Public Health Panorama*, and electronic platforms such as the European Health Information Gateway and the European Health Statistics mobile application (4–6).

Strengthening Member States’ systems capacity is core to the Action Plan and EHII. This includes putting in place institutional mechanisms that allow Member States to strategically interlink and reinforce the interface between the generation of high-quality evidence and its systematic and transparent use in policy-making. This is particularly important for the implementation of WHO’s Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023, and its impact framework (7). With a view to contributing to and catalysing the implementation of the Action Plan, the Regional Office offers a range of flagship capacity-building opportunities, most prominently the Autumn School on Health Information and Evidence for Policy-making and the associated Advanced Course, as well as the Evidence-informed Policy Network workshops.

Health information and evidence, along with innovation, are the most cross-cutting areas of public health and are needed by all public health professionals. Investing in the strengthening of health information and e-health systems brings many dividends, including greater transparency and accountability. Health information from trusted sources is the ultimate enabler for the democratization of health and is particularly important at times when fake information and poor statistics are highjacked for political agendas.

We at the Regional Office are looking forward to working with our Member States to continue the implementation of the Action Plan and encourage all stakeholders to develop evidence-informed policies for better health.

REFERENCES¹

1. Action plan to strengthen the use of evidence, information and research for policy-making in the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (EUR/RC66/12; http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/314727/66wd12e_EIPActionPlan_160528.pdf?ua=1).
2. European Health Information Initiative. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/287275/EHII_Booklet_EN_rev1.pdf?ua=1).
3. Greenhalgh T. Cultural contexts of health: the use of narrative research in the health sector. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (Health Evidence Network synthesis report 49; http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/317623/HEN-synthesis-report-49.pdf).

¹ All references accessed on 20 March 2019.

4. European Health Report 2018. More than numbers – evidence for all. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2018 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/european-health-report/european-health-report-2018>).
5. Data and evidence [website]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 <http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence>).
6. Bridging the gap. Public Health Panorama. 2016;2(3) (http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/317608/Full-Volume2-Issue3-september-2016.pdf?ua=1).
7. Thirteenth general programme of work 2019–2023 [website]. Geneva: World Health organization; 2019 (<https://www.who.int/about/what-we-do/gpw-thirteen-consultation/en/>). ■