

Working together to advance resilient health systems across the OECD



At the OECD Health Ministerial Meeting on Jan 23, 2024, health ministers from the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) discussed policies needed to strengthen the resilience of health systems, in an often adverse political and economic context. During the COVID-19 pandemic governments learned the importance of being prepared, of communicating transparently, and cooperating in trust, to respond to the unpredictable. When the next health crisis hits, our response must be coordinated, fast, and strong.

Although efforts to improve preparedness are under way, we must not omit the fundamental lessons COVID-19 has taught us not only about preparedness, but also about investment in health care. While a full account of the pandemic response will still take more time in many settings, different reviews¹⁻³ have highlighted insufficient preparation with response plans inadequate to respond to a system-wide shock. Fundamentally, the pandemic revealed major unaddressed vulnerabilities of countries' health systems, notably with regard to medical supply chains and the health workforce against a backdrop of long-standing lacunae in investment in health systems.⁴ The health workforce rightly received much praise during the pandemic, yet faced extreme pressures, exacerbated by pre-existing staff shortages.⁵

In 2024 health systems are still struggling to overcome the care backlog in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the care backlog, the pandemic also underscored the increasing salience of mental ill-health.⁶ Training of health workers, mainly nurses and general practitioners, is not keeping up with projected needs as populations age. International recruitment of the health workforce is not a viable solution for all countries, given the global shortage of health workers, which is estimated to reach 10 million in 2030.⁷ We know governments have to invest more, in a targeted way, in the resilience of health systems. However, the costs involved, given historical underinvestment, are substantial. With regard to the health workforce, there is also a need to reconsider the sharing of tasks and responsibilities to make optimum use of all available

talents and skills.⁸ Such a reform drive requires international cooperation.

The conundrum facing health ministers is how to boost investment in health system resilience at a time of rising health-care costs while economic constraints have restricted fiscal space. Innovative solutions are needed to navigate these challenges. Simply multiplying what already exists will not work. It is not tenable to spend more money on treating the consequences of ill-health without addressing the wider context of health system resilience. The renewed OECD health system performance assessment framework, which was approved in December, 2023, can inform decisions on future investment priorities.⁹

First, much more emphasis needs to be placed on addressing the determinants of ill-health and promoting healthier environments and behaviours. This approach is crucial to respond to health challenges such as obesity, which has nearly tripled worldwide since 1975.¹⁰ Health systems alone cannot change the broader social determinants of health. They need to work in partnership with the populations they serve. The need for people-centred care has never been greater, but so too has the need for societal conditions that make a healthy lifestyle possible for all people. For too long disease risk factors have been framed as mostly linked to individual choices. The commercial determinants of health are rightly now receiving increased attention.¹¹⁻¹³ In addition to what individual countries can do, the OECD and WHO can provide evidence and recommendations; the EU can create necessary legislation for its internal market (eg, taxation, health warnings, regulation of advertisements, nutrition labelling, and age limits).

Second, policies are needed to address health inequalities and gender biases. More than 80% of adults in the highest income quintile rated their health as good or very good in 2021, compared to 60% of adults in the lowest income quintile on average across OECD countries.⁶ Ill-health reduces lifetime earnings, fuelling a vicious cycle.^{14,15} Addressing health inequalities requires a well organised and adequately funded welfare state and the social standards it embodies.



Published Online
January 23, 2024
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)00129-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)00129-6)

For the OECD Health Ministerial Meeting see <https://www.oecd-events.org/health-ministerial/en/content/ministerial-meeting>

Third, populations are ageing. Worldwide, the number of people aged 65 years or older, a population that typically has the greatest health-care needs, is projected to more than double, reaching 1.6 billion in 2050.¹⁶ Yet, with falling birth rates in many countries, the population in work supporting those no longer working continues to shrink, making it even more important to increase the number of healthy life-years in the population.

Addressing these challenges requires policy reform. Greater use of digital solutions, including the use of artificial intelligence solutions under clear guidance,¹⁷ can help to transform the delivery of health care. Governments need to drive out ineffective health spending to cover the extra investment to strengthen resilience. It is staggering to find that some health expenditure provides little or no value.¹⁸ Reducing such wasteful spending on health would liberate considerable amounts to invest in more and better care.

Governments need to look beyond health systems to redouble efforts to prevent ill health and address the social determinants of health. Bold decisions must be made if we are to deliver more resilient health systems, reduce inequalities, and keep people healthier for longer. This progress is feasible, but only if we work together. Health ministers need the support of the whole of government, stakeholders, citizens, health practitioners, and patients. That is our message, but also our common ambition as health ministers, for the years ahead.

I am the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health for the Belgium Government and Chair of the 2024 OECD Health Ministerial Meeting.

Frank Vandenbroucke
info@vandenbroucke.fed.be

Ministry of Health, Government of Belgium, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

- 1 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Evaluation of Belgium's COVID-19 responses: fostering trust for a more resilient society. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/evaluation-of-belgium-s-covid-19-responses_990b14aa-en (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 2 Sirleaf EJ, Clark H. Report of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response: making COVID-19 the last pandemic. *Lancet* 2021; **398**: 101–03.

- 3 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: a synthesis. Jan 21, 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis-483507d6/> (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 4 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Ready for the next crisis? Investing in health system resilience. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023. <https://www.oecd.org/health/ready-for-the-next-crisis-investing-in-health-system-resilience-1e53cf80-en.htm> (accessed Jan 21, 2024).
- 5 Smallwood N, Bismark M, Willis K. Burn-out in the health workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic: opportunities for workplace and leadership approaches to improve well-being. *BMJ* 2023; **7**: 178–81.
- 6 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Health at a glance 2023: OECD indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-2023_7a7afb35-en (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 7 WHO. Global strategy on human resources for health: workforce 2030: reporting at Seventy-fifth World Health Assembly. 2022. <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-06-2022-global-strategy-on-human-resources-for-health--workforce-2030> (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 8 Winkelmann J, Scarpetti G, Williams GA, Maier CB, eds. Policy brief: how can skill-mix innovations support the implementation of integrated care for people with chronic conditions and multimorbidity? <https://eurohealthobservatory.who.int/publications/i/how-can-skill-mix-innovations-support-the-implementation-of-integrated-care-for-people-with-chronic-conditions-and-multimorbidity> (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 9 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Rethinking health system performance assessment: a renewed framework. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024.
- 10 WHO. Obesity and overweight. 2021. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight> (accessed Jan 19, 2024).
- 11 Gilmore AB, Fabbri A, Baum F, et al. Defining and conceptualising the commercial determinants of health. *Lancet* 2023; **401**: 1194–213.
- 12 Lacy-Nichols J, Nandi S, Mialon M, et al. Conceptualising commercial entities in public health: beyond unhealthy commodities and transnational corporations. *Lancet* 2023; **401**: 1214–28.
- 13 Friel S, Collin J, Daube M, et al. Commercial determinants of health: future directions. *Lancet* 2023; **401**: 1229–40.
- 14 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Fitter minds, fitter jobs: from awareness to change in integrated mental health, skills and work policies, mental health and work. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/fitter-minds-fitter-jobs_a0815d0f-en (accessed Jan 21, 2024).
- 15 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Health at a glance: Europe (2016): state of health in the EU cycle. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-europe-2016_9789264265592-en (accessed Jan 21, 2024).
- 16 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. World social report 2023: leaving no one behind in an ageing world. New York, NY: United Nations, 2023.
- 17 WHO. Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence for health: guidance on large multi-modal models. Jan 18, 2024. <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-01-2024-who-releases-ai-ethics-and-governance-guidance-for-large-multi-modal-models> (accessed Jan 21, 2024).
- 18 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Tackling wasteful spending on health. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017. <https://www.oecd.org/health/tackling-wasteful-spending-on-health-9789264266414-en.htm> (accessed Jan 19, 2024).