Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies

A few milestones in our 20 years of existence

1996

The landmark WHO conference on European Health Care Reforms, held on 17-20 June 1996 in Ljubljana (Slovenia) gives impetus to the idea of establishing a clearing-house on health care reforms. In the ‘Ljubljana Charter on reforming Health Care’, health ministers make a pledge for better monitoring of health care reforms and learning from each other’s experiences in tackling similar challenges.

For this conference a batch of country health system profiles are developed, describing national health systems according to a common template. They form the basis of what will become the Health Systems in Transition (HiT) series.

1998

On 22 May 1998, Jo Asvall, the then Regional Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe is the first to sign the partnership agreement on a project called ‘the European Observatory on Health Care Systems’. This is followed by the government of Norway, the European Investment Bank, the World Bank and both the London School of Economics and Political Science and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

A few months later, in September 1998, the Government of Spain also joins as partner. Spain will withdraw from the partnership in 2012 after the financial crisis has hit the country’s health system hard and priorities have changed.

The Observatory starts from its base in the WHO Regional Office for Europe under the leadership of Josep Figueras with three Research Directors: Elias Mossialos, Martin McKee and Richard Saltman and supported by Suszy Lessof. It opens three hubs at the LSE and LSH&TM in London and the Escuela Nacional de Sanidad in Madrid. The latter hub is run by Reinhard Busse who later on goes to set up and head the Berlin hub at TUB.
1999

The official launch of the Observatory takes place on 11 February 1999 at a meeting hosted at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Under the heading ‘Evidence into Action’ more than 100 participants from a broad range of European countries, representing Ministries of Health, international agencies, non-governmental organisations and academic institutions discuss the concrete goals the Observatory has set itself in terms of monitoring, analysis, dissemination and training.

Dr Jo E. Asvall, WHO Regional Director for Europe 1985-2000

In March 1999, the Observatory launches its newsletter, called Euro Observer, as a complement to Eurohealth, the journal published by LSE Health and Social Care and the European Health Policy Research Network (EHPRN).

In August 1999 the Observatory starts organising the annual Dubrovnik (Croatia) Summer School, with the support of the Andrija Štampar School of Public Health in Zagreb and the Open Society Institute. The school, which will run from 1999 until 2002, is aimed at senior policy makers in Central and Eastern Europe and provides a mix of lectures, group discussions and project sessions on health topics. One of the key features of the social programme is the Staff vs Students annual water polo championship.

- Implementing health care reforms in Europe (1999)
- Hospitals in a changing Europe (2000)
- Public health and health services: managing the interface (2001)

In 1999 the first HiT (Health Care Systems in Transition) profiles are produced on Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal and the UK. Also three seminal studies are developed, each one focusing on a topical issue in health care reform: the organisation of hospitals, the regulation of entrepreneurial behaviour and options for health care funding.

The Observatory’s volume on Critical challenges for health care reform in Europe, emanating from the 1996 Ljubljana Conference wins the 1999 European Health Management Association (EHMA) Baxter award.
Award. This annual award is given to an outstanding publication and/or practical contribution to excellence in health care management in Europe.

Josep Figueras and Richard Saltman, editors of ‘Critical Challenges for Health Care Reform in Europe’ receiving the 1999 EHMA Baxter Award from Sebastian Rohde, Director Public Affairs Europe, Baxter

2000

In March 2000 the Open Society Institute joins the partnership as an associated member, increasing the focus on Eastern Europe and highlighting the interests of NGOs in evidence-based health reforms. It will leave the partnership in 2008 because it only planned a time limited engagement and subsequently withdraws completely from health and from Europe.

In 2000 the production of HiT profiles comes up to speed with 13 new reports published (Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

To streamline the HiT production a few tools are produced to guide authors and editors, such as a HiT handbook and a glossary on health system terminology.

2001

In April 2001 the Government of Greece becomes a partner. It will leave again in 2006 because of changing political demands and priorities.

2002

In February Sweden joins the partnership.

After it publishes a special issue of Eurohealth on Implementing hospital reform in central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia in September 2001, the Observatory becomes the new editing partner of Eurohealth in Spring 2002. Euro Observer will continue to run as a newsletter until 2011 when it is integrated in Eurohealth.

The first issues of Eurohealth with the Observatory

For the second time the Observatory receives the prestigious EHMA Baxter Award for one of its publications, Funding health care: options for Europe, edited by Elias Mossialos, Anna Dixon, Josep Figueras and Joe Kutzin. This volume has become one of the Observatory “bestsellers”, with a high number of downloads.

The Observatory provides evidence support to the 2001 Belgian EU Presidency on its health priority, which results in 2002 in the publication of two volumes on the impact of EU Law on health care systems and the social nature of health care. This idea of supporting EU Member States during their EU Presidencies with evidence on their health priorities will be replicated with Finland, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Malta and now Austria in 2018. Also this work on the impact of EU integration on health systems is the start of a range of studies and activities on EU-related topics, such as patient and professional mobility, cross-border cooperation etc..

2003

In February 2003 the name is changed into ‘European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies’. The Secretariat moves from Copenhagen to Brussels, where the Observatory is hosted by the WHO European Centre for Health Policy, which was established in December 1998 with the support of the
Belgian government. As a result, Belgium also joins the partnership.

In June 2003 the Observatory celebrates its first five years of existence. Partners renew the agreement for another five years.

The Observatory engages in a wide range of meetings with senior policy makers, including a high-level policy seminar in Madrid on coordination in decentralised health care systems, the Caucasus Health Care Financing Workshop in Tbilisi (Georgia), the Central Asia primary care workshop in Almaty (Kazakhstan), a national purchasing workshop in Sofia (Bulgaria), a workshop on EU enlargement in Budapest (Hungary) and a workshop on health care reform in Ankara (Turkey). This is the start of a successful programme of directly engaging with policy makers through the organisation of policy dialogues, which are gradually developed as a particular brand of knowledge transfer.

Martin McKee is awarded the Štampar Medal 2003 at the ASPHER conference in Granada. This prestigious public health award will be also awarded to Josep Figueras in 2006 at the ASPHER conference in Maastricht and to Elias Mossialos in 2010 at the ASPHER conference in Amsterdam.

2004

In January 2004 the government of Finland joins the partnership, followed in June by the Italian regional government of Veneto. The accession of ten new Member States to the European Union is supported with a new study on Health policy and EU enlargement that reviews the challenges and opportunities for health. It also marks the start of the Baltic policy dialogue series, an annual

sub-regional meeting of a select group of senior-level health decision makers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, organised jointly with WHO/Europe, exchanging experience and best practice on a policy issue of common concern.

- Health financing and purchasing services (Tallinn 2004);
- Human resources (Vilnius 2005);
- Provider networks and integrated care (Riga 2006);
- Governance of hospitals and health financing agencies to enhance health system performance (Pärnu 2007);
- Policy options and governance issues in the field of public health (Vilnius 2008);
- Health system responses to the global economic crisis: exploring health policy options and strategies (Riga 2009);
- Ensuring access to medicines: harnessing health policies in face of the crisis (Tallinn 2010)
- Implementing integrated public health strategies to improve health and reduce health inequities (Vilnius 2011);
- Reorganising the hospital sector: exploring new ways of payment and governance (Riga 2012).
- Free movement in health care: a sub-regional approach to cross-border care and health professional mobility (Tallinn 2013)
- Investing in integrated care solutions to manage multiple and chronic conditions: analysing evidence, sharing experience and exploring implications (Vilnius 2014)
- Ensuring access to new medicines in the Baltics: exploring strategies and options for pricing, reimbursement, usage and collaboration (Riga 2015)
- Strengthening primary care: implementing change towards better coordination and more multi-professional working (Tallinn 2016)
- Improving quality of care and ensuring patient safety: strategies, regulation, monitoring and incentives (Vilnius 2017)

Baltic policy dialogue 2017 in Vilnius, Lithuania
2005

In July 2005 the Luxembourg Public Research Centre for Health (CRP Santé Luxembourg) becomes a new partner but withdraws the next year because of changing political demands and priorities.

Two new major studies are published with Open University Press: Social health insurance systems in Western Europe, edited by Richard Saltman, Reinhard Busse and Josep Figueras; and Purchasing to improve health systems performance, edited by Josep Figueras, Ray Robinson & Elke Jakubowski.

2006

In September 2006 the Republic of Slovenia joins the Observatory’s partnership. In November 2006 the European Commission sits as an observer in the Observatory’s Steering Committee with the aim of later joining as a full partner.

The Observatory provides evidence support to the Finnish EU Presidency on its main health theme: Health in All Policies: Prospects and potentials.

2007

In April the Observatory organises a series of expert panels on cross-border care to explore the impact and feasibility of certain policy options. These meetings aim to support the European Commission in developing a new Community framework for free movement of health care services, which ultimately will lead to the 2011 Regulation on patients’ rights in cross-border care.

In July 2007 the Observatory restarts its annual summer school, this time in Venice on the island of San Servolo. With the support of its partners, the Veneto Region, the WHO and the European Commission, the Observatory Venice Summer School under the leadership of Reinhard Busse offers a one week intensive course of learning, interaction and sharing of experiences with policy makers, civil servants and professionals from a wide range of countries, focus on a specific topic.

- Human Resources for Health (2007)
- Hospital Re-engineering: new roles, tasks and structures (2008)
- Innovation and Health Technology Assessment: Improving Health System Quality (2009)
- EU integration and health systems (2010)
- Performance Assessment for Health System Improvement: Uses and Abuses (2012)
- Re-thinking pharmaceutical policy. Optimising decisions in an era of uncertainty (2014)
- Primary care: innovating for integrated, more effective care (2016)
- Placing the person at the centre of the health system: Concepts, strategies, results (2017)
- Quality of care: Improving effectiveness, safety and responsiveness (2018)
The Observatory’s book on Mental Health Policy and Practice across Europe wins the 2007 EHMA Baxter Award for the best publication in health policy.

2008

The Observatory celebrates its 10th anniversary. In March 2008 the Observatory is awarded with the World Bank prize “Improving the lives of people in ECA 2008” for its contribution to the field of knowledge and learning. In December partners renew the agreement for another 5 year.

For the WHO Ministerial Conference on Health Systems: “Health Systems for Health and Wealth”, which is organised in Tallinn (Estonia) on 25-27 June 2008, the Observatory together with the Health Evidence Network produces a series of nine policy briefs.

- How can European health systems support investment in and the implementation of population health strategies?
- How can the impact of health technology assessments be enhanced?
- Where are the patients in decision-making about their own care?
- How can the settings used to provide care to older people be balanced?
- When do vertical (stand-alone) programmes have a place in health systems?
- How can chronic disease management programmes operate across care settings and providers?
- How can the migration of health service professionals be managed so as to reduce any negative effects on supply?
- How can optimal skill mix be effectively implemented and why?
- Do lifelong learning and revalidation ensure that physicians are fit to practice?

The Observatory supports the Slovenian EU Presidency on its health priority on responding to the challenge of cancer in Europe.
In November the Observatory together with WHO organises a multi-country policy dialogue in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for the Newly Independent States on the reform of public health and the role of SANEPID.

The Observatory supports both the Czech and Swedish EU Presidencies with evidence on their health priorities, delivering policy briefs on financial sustainability and population ageing; and a study on incentives for antibiotic research.

The Observatory starts developing a new strand of activity: developing sound methodologies for measuring and assessing health systems performance. A first volume is produced which sets out the principles, dimensions and first experiences.

### 2009

In October 2009 the French National Union of Health Insurance Funds (Union Nationale des Caisses d'Assurance Maladie - UNCAM) becomes a new partner. In December the European Commission and Ireland both join the Observatory Partnership.

Under the European Commission’s Research Framework Programme (FP7), the Observatory leads a two-year project to map current knowledge-brokering practices for health policy-making in Europe. The results of this BRIDGE project (Scoping Study of Approaches to Brokering Knowledge and Research Information to Support the Development and Governance of Health Systems in Europe) are published in a series of policy briefs and a volume.

### 2010

In March 2010 the Government of the Netherlands joins the partnership for a limited period of 3 years.

Following a rigorous assessment of its quality, methodology and relevance by a panel of scientific experts, the Health System in Transition (HiT) series now also becomes available in MEDLINE, the most prominent bibliographic database of life sciences and biomedical information. Later the policy briefs will be included as well.

Based on the solid collaborations emanating from the work on the HiT health system reviews, the network of National Lead Institutions (NLIs) is founded. This network consists initially of 16 independent research institutions in countries with strong track records in health systems, public health and health management analysis. It will gradually extend and also integrate the members of the Health Policy Monitor, which is hosted by the Bertelsmann Foundation, to finally becoming the Observatory’s Health Systems and Policy Network (HSPM).
The Observatory also starts collaborating with the British Medical Journal (BMJ) on a new occasional series called Health Systems Perspectives, reporting on developments in the European Union and the EU health policy agenda.

In the second half of the year the Observatory supports the Belgian EU Presidency’s focus on health workforce with the publication of four policy briefs on planning and forecasting; adapting skills and lifelong learning; attractive and supportive working environments; audit and feedback mechanisms on quality and safety.

The Observatory increases its capacity to rapidly respond to requests for evidence support and turns this into a service to Partners and a public good.

2011

In February the Observatory launches its @OBSHealth twitter account.

Under the Hungarian EU Presidency the results of the Health Professional mobility in the European Union (PROMeTHEUS) Study, an FP7 project started in 2009, are presented to the Informal Council of Health Ministers and to the Health Committee of the European Parliament.

As part of the longstanding collaboration with the European Health Forum Gastein, the Observatory together with the Russian Ministry of Health and the WHO Barcelona Office for Health Systems Strengthening organises a workshop on health financing reform lessons from the East.

In December Eurohealth and Euro Observer merge into a single publication to become the Observatory’s quarterly journal.
2012

In July the European Commission sets up Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health, a multi-sectoral and independent panel of experts to provide expert opinions on various health topics to support EU health policy making. Martin McKee is an appointed member of the panel, while other Observatory colleagues are invited for specific support on selected topics.

2013

In January 2013 the United Kingdom becomes a partner, followed by the Austrian Ministry of Health in December. The partnership is extended for another 5 year period until December 2018.

At the WHO conference on health systems and the economic crisis, which is held in April 2013 and hosted by Norway, the final results are presented of a major cross-country review that was undertaken in previous years jointly by the Observatory and WHO/Europe on the health policy responses to the financial crisis for the whole European Region. At this occasion the Observatory also launches the Health & Financial Crisis Monitor (HFCM), a new web platform developed with the Andalusian School of Public Health that gathers all scientific literature on the financial crisis and its effect on health and health systems. In May 2013 the HFCM Twitter account is launched to also list grey literature.

Earlier, in February, the Observatory held a workshop on strengthening health protection in times of economic crisis: increasing the evidence base, together with the European Parliament’s Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA) unit.

The Observatory also supports the development of the Vilnius Declaration calling for Sustainable Health Systems for Inclusive Growth under the Lithuanian EU Presidency.

(Left to right) Hans Kluge and Sarah Thomson (WHO/Europe); Marina Karanikolos, Josep Figueras, Ewout van Ginneken (Observatory); Liudvika Starkiene and Prof Vilius Grabauskas (Lithuanian Health Forum)

From 2013 the Observatory is invited by DG Health & Consumers to organise an annual series of health systems briefings on selected EU countries in order to better monitor health reforms and assess performance. This fits in the context of the European Semester process and the development of country-specific recommendations related to the health sector.

Later in the year the HSPM web platform is launched. This new multifunctional web site allows for a more regular updating of the HiT health systems reviews and provides up to date information on health reforms and changes that are particularly policy relevant. Also the regular OBS website is renewed.

In connection to the HSPM platform, collaboration is started with the scientific journal Health Policy. Through this partnership, open access is offered to the Health Reform Monitor, an articles series that provide an overview of proposed, discussed, recently passed or implemented reforms in European countries. Since the beginning of the collaboration, more than 110 articles have been published with nearly 400,000 downloads.

New HiT health system reviews on the United States and Canada are published.

2014

In September at the request of the Council Work Party on Public Health at Senior Level the European Commission sets up the Expert Group on Health Systems Performance Assessment (HSPA). The Observatory is invited with WHO and OECD to assist in its work.

Together with WHO support is provided to the decision making on the financial crisis in Ireland.
In this year of European election the Observatory publishes ‘Everything you always wanted to know about EU health policies but were afraid to ask’, a textbook overview of EU policies related to health.

2015

Martin McKee is awarded the 2015 Donabedian International Award. This prestigious award honours those that have made a substantial contribution to healthcare excellence.

The Observatory is supporting the European Commission in the implementation of the European Reference Networks (ERNs). At a conference in Lisbon it leads a series of workshops that help candidate networks to prepare successful proposals.

2016

In July 2016 the Government of Switzerland becomes a partner.

At the request of the Slovenian Ministry of Health the Observatory with WHO/Europe leads a comprehensive review of the country’s health system, helping to design national reform measures to enhance financial sustainability, improve service delivery and promote efficiency in the health sector.

In a similar way the Observatory leads an international expert panel to organise a pre-review of the proposed health and social care reform in Finland at the request of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

In June the 20th anniversary of the Ljubljana Charter on Reforming Health Care in Europe is celebrated, which also led to the creation of the Observatory. At this occasion a special issue of EuroHealth is dedicated to achievements in the field of health systems strengthening.

In October, the Observatory is invited to present international health trends in order to inform the activities of the Committee on the future of health care of the Irish Parliament (Houses of the Oireachtas).

2017

For the Maltese EU Presidency the Observatory launches a new HiT health system review and produces two policy briefs on how voluntary cross-border collaboration in the EU can help countries to improve access to highly specialised care and health technologies. These briefs are presented at a technical workshop in Valetta in March.

The Observatory is invited by the Ministry of Health of Portugal to assess together with WHO/Europe the performance of the Portuguese health system in facing key challenges and meeting objectives in the post-financial crisis recovery period.


definition

Left to right: Hans Kluge (WHO/Europe), Prof Constantino Sakallarides (University of Lisbon) and Josep Figueras (Observatory)
At the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) a new Observatory study is launched on the role of civil society in improving to public health and strengthening health systems.

EU Health Commissioner Andriukaitis (centre) with study editor Matthias Wismar (Observatory) and Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb (EHFG Secretary General)

Under the lead of Ellen Nolte the Observatory engages with a new consortium coordinated by the President of the National Institute of Health of Italy, Walter Ricciardi, which aims to develop a joint European research programme for producing research evidence supporting health care services and systems.

In December the European Commission as part of its State of Health in the EU cycle presents a series of 28 country health profiles that have been produced jointly by the Observatory and OECD. These new profiles are presented at the EPSCO Council and the European Parliament.

The Observatory’s Steering Committee (December 2017 meeting)

The Observatory celebrates its 20th anniversary in good company: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (70 years), Alma Ata Declaration (40 years), Tallinn Charter (10 years). On the latter, it actively supports the WHO Regional Office for Europe in the organisation of the High-level meeting on Health Systems for Prosperity and Solidarity – Leaving no one behind.

In follow up to the publication of the State of Health in the EU country profiles, voluntary exchange meetings are organised in Finland, Poland, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium to further discuss specific topics highlighted in the reports.

As part of the upcoming Austrian EU Presidency the Observatory is providing evidence support with two policy briefs on addressing policy failures in pharmaceutical policy and one on health co-benefits in the food system.

The Observatory is now publishing new work on public health services, person-centred health systems, quality, skill mix and nursing, the economics of healthy and active ageing, AMR, the changing role of hospitals. To be continued ….

Compilation and development: Willy Palm (OBS)
Since its creation in 1998 the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies has been developing an evidence base to support policy makers in running, reforming and strengthening health systems. As a partnership of international agencies, national governments, decentralised authorities and research institutes it promotes the idea of evidence-based policy making in health. For this, its staff together with a broad international network of researchers and policy makers analyse the complexities and dynamics of health systems. Mindful of context, they tailor the high-quality material that is produced to the specific policy needs and questions and engage directly with stakeholders and decision makers. The Observatory wants to act as a bridge between the research communities and policy makers in different countries in Europe and elsewhere.

A knowledge broker

- The Observatory is widely recognised as one of the leading international knowledge brokers in the field of health that provides evidence support to national and international policy making processes.
- We generate high-quality evidence on public health policy and health systems developments that is tailored and packaged to meet the needs of policy makers.

A partnership

- The Observatory was founded in 1998 as a partnership of public agents in health policy and has expanded ever since.
- International agencies: the World Health Organisation’s Regional Office for Europe, the European Commission, the World Bank
- National governments: Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom
- Decentralised authorities: the Veneto Region of Italy, the National Union of Health Insurance Funds of France
- Research institutes: the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- The partnership is hosted by WHO. We are based in Brussels with research hubs in London and Berlin.

A public good

- Our work is focused on the whole European Region and freely available to decision makers, researchers, stakeholders and citizens. Our publications are open access.
- Inspired by the Observatory’s experience in Europe, similar projects were initiated in other parts of the world. We have two sister organisations: the Asia Pacific Observatory on Health Systems and Policies (based in New Delhi, India) and the North American Observatory on Health Systems and Policy (based in Toronto, Canada).

Our mission:
- strengthening health systems – promoting evidence-based policy making - bridging the gap between health research and policy making

Our approach:
- informing policy makers - sharing international evidence and experience – building partnerships

Our functions:
- monitoring country health systems – analysing trends and health policy developments – assessing health systems performance – engaging with policy makers