



## The Vienna Declaration on the health of men and boys in Europe

### --- Background document ---

On October 1<sup>st</sup> 2005, members of the European Men's Health Forum meeting in Vienna ratified the first ever men's health Declaration. Now known as the Vienna Declaration on the Health of Men and Boys in Europe, this landmark document provides a clear and central reference for all involved in the health improvement of European men.

Two hundred and twenty six million men reside in the European Union and EFTA countries. A great many of them are living with a condition which impacts on their health and that of others, yet they often don't seek professional help or advice. Because men tend not to relate to health matters in the same way as women, millions of them remain undiagnosed or access healthcare at an advanced disease stage. Health services of every kind are failing to engage effectively with many men, especially men in disadvantaged groups. They are left exposed to the risks and costly complications associated with poorly managed illness, and die prematurely.

For example, death rates for men under the age of 65 are dramatically and consistently higher than for women across most health conditions. Differences in life expectancies between men and women range from 4.4 in Sweden to a staggering 11.8 years in Latvia. Differences in male life expectancies of up to 12.9 years between Sweden and Latvia, but also within countries (up to 15 years between various parts of the London area), cannot simply be explained by genetic factors.

Many more men die from suicide than women, yet depression is still one of the conditions perceived as a predominantly female issue. Suicide alone causes more deaths in young men than road traffic accidents in most European countries. European men also experience the vast majority of accidents in the workplace. In the EU 15, they account for more than 94% of related fatalities\*.

Poor health and premature death in men also adversely impacts on the health of women and children, working careers, and on the wealth of society as a whole. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the highest male life expectancy in many European countries does not reach its shortest female equivalent. If nothing is done, the average age at which a man will die in 2020 will only reach that of women in the 1980's<sup>†</sup>.

The European Men's Health Forum makes comparisons between men's and women's health only when it is unavoidable to do so. We do not advocate shifting attention away from female health or re-allocating resources from women to men. The reduction of health inequalities, social cohesion and economic support are crucial to the vitality of our societies and to giving today's boys a chance of becoming tomorrow's healthier men.

The European Men's Health Forum therefore calls for five key recommendations to be implemented as a matter of urgency:

#### **Recognise men's health as a distinct and important issue**

Politicians, policy makers, health professionals, the media and the public, need to recognise and understand that men's health is much more than just about diseases that only affect men. It is also about the consequences of male attitudes to health in general. Such attitudes impacts on the health of men but also on that of women, and have their far-reaching consequences across all areas of society.

The assumption that men may not pay much interest for their health almost certainly results in inadequate support for men and may generate a sense of resigned acceptance

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\* Source: Eurostat

† Section 4.2 White & Cash EMHF Report 2003

among those concerned with improving public health. Most of all, it perpetuates a myth that affects men themselves.

Instead, it must be replaced with an acceptance of the central importance of men's health for the future wellbeing of the male population – and with a positive willingness to meet this challenge head on.

### **Develop a better understanding of male attitudes to health**

While it is clear that the existing, broadly 'unisex', approach to health promotion and healthcare provision is failing men and women, there is currently a major absence of knowledge about these matters. Unless a better understanding is developed, men will continue to suffer ill-health unnecessarily and will remain less likely to access support services. Achieving such an understanding is vital and will require a comprehensive and dedicated research programme at EU and national levels, and active consultation with international bodies interested in men's health.

### **Invest in 'male sensitive' approaches to providing healthcare**

Health promotion and earlier diagnosis will, in most cases, significantly reduce financial and non-financial costs associated with medical complications. With improved management, men would better adhere to their treatment and limit drug wastage. There is an increasing recognition that men can be encouraged to take their health seriously, provided they are approached in a male sensitive way.

A step change would be achieved by making routine health checks more widely and easily available outside of clinical settings, and by promoting that availability in a way that encourages male uptake.

National health screening, promotion and prevention campaigns should be developed for conditions of particular male prevalence, or where a high rate of under-diagnosis in men persists.

### **Initiate work on health for boys and young men at schools and community settings**

The establishment of a healthy lifestyle and mental well-being before adulthood is likely to further reduce and delay the risks of poor health. It is also imperative that young boys learn to use health services effectively such that they can be more independent in their own health management.

Attention must be paid to attitudes and behaviours specific to boys and to developing interventions that are more likely to appeal to them. The focus on young men must continue into adulthood, with interventions targeting other community settings, such as the workplace.

### **Develop coordinated health and social policies that promote men's health**

It is not enough to concentrate solely on solutions targeted at individuals, important though these are.

Likewise, acting just in the field of men's health cannot solve the problem. Solutions must be integrated and coordinated with other areas such as employment, housing, education, and environment.

The problem of men's health can only be tackled effectively through immediate concerted action within and between European countries.

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#### **'EMHF: tackling inequalities in men's health across Europe'**

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