The 'Health, demographic change and well-being' societal challenge

What are our objectives?

The headline goal of the 'Health, demographic change and well-being' societal challenge is better health for all. In line with Commission priorities, our main policy objectives are to improve health and well-being outcomes, to promote healthy and active ageing, to promote market growth, job creation, and the EU as a global leader in the health area.

The 'Health, demographic change and well-being' societal challenge is part of Horizon 2020 (2014-2020), which is implementing the Innovation Union, a Europe 2020 flagship initiative.

Which challenges do we address?

The challenges associated to 'Health, demographic change and well-being' derive from the ageing of European population and lifestyle patterns, which, if not actively managed through a life-course approach, will increase the burden of chronic diseases on individuals, on existing health and care systems and on society. This will also result in increase of public expenditure coupled with labour force and productivity losses.

What type of research do we support?

Horizon 2020 offers tailored-made instruments to each and every specific need for health research, from fellowships and grants for individual or large collaborative public-private consortiums, to loans schemes.

The 'Health, demographic change and well-being' societal challenge is a €7.257 billion programme focusing on translational collaborative health research. We aim at stimulating the entire health research and innovation cycle from bench to bedside and the rapid transfer of knowledge. We therefore support solution-oriented research projects which are expected to impact on the development of new medical interventions and of evidence-based healthcare guidelines, policies and regulations.

Our research projects outcomes offer a unique opportunity to improve the quality of life of EU citizens, to stimulate EU industrial competitiveness by mobilising relevant European research and innovation performers in healthcare, both public and private, and to position the EU as a central player in the global context. In addition, bound to improve quality of life, ICT will increasingly allow older people to stay active and productive for longer; to continue to engage in society with more accessible online services; and to enjoy a healthier and higher quality of life for longer.

What are our main strategic orientations?

1. To create a systemic change in health by promoting personalised health and care research. The idea is to develop a medical model using the characterization of individuals' phenotypes and genotypes (e.g. molecular profiling, medical imaging, lifestyle data) for tailoring the right therapeutic strategy for the right person at the right time, and/or to determine the predisposition to disease and/or to deliver timely and targeted prevention.

The implementation is done through the support of research projects and the development of a programme-level cooperation approach with Member States in order to avoid fragmentation of efforts. In addition, the eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 (which also includes mobile health – mHealth) provides a roadmap to empower patients and healthcare workers, to link up devices and technologies, and to invest in research towards the personalised medicine of the future.

Another policy initiative concerns the 'European Human Biomonitoring Initiative' (EHBMI), bringing together national and EU activities in this area with the objective to create a joint knowledge base on the chemical exposure of European citizens and the impact of chemicals on health.

2. To foster a stronger European healthcare industry supported by partnerships and innovative financial instruments. The idea is to fully exploit the potential of new knowledge, innovation, technology and entrepreneurship in healthcare business. It is very important to encourage private companies to apply research results for meeting challenges faced by society and for creating more high-quality jobs. This strategy is implemented through:

- The Innovative Medicines Initiative fully serves this purpose bringing together the relevant stakeholders to drive the development of better and safer medicines and other interventions in an open innovation ecosystem. The budget allocated for the second phase of this public-private initiative (2014-2024) is € 3.3 billion out of which EU contributed with € 1.6 billion from Horizon 2020.
- A specifically-dedicated SME instrument designed for highly innovative companies. By 2020, 7% of the 'Health, demographic change and well-being' societal challenge budget will be allocated to this scheme.
- Better access to loans in areas of high risky and unmet medical need. The InnovFin Infectious Diseases enables the European Investment Bank to provide between € 7.5 million and € 75 million to innovative players active in developing vaccines, drugs, medical and diagnostic devices, and research infrastructures for combatting infectious diseases. Financing is aimed at projects that have passed the pre-clinical stage and for which clinical validation is needed for further development.

3. To strengthen health research capacities and innovation strategies across all Member States. The idea is to support European coordination in health and disease research and avoid duplication. This is achieved through supporting 'ERA-NETs and 'Joint Programming Initiatives'' in areas such as personalised medicine, brain including neurodegenerative diseases, antimicrobial resistance, cancer, cardiovascular, or systems medicines. Moreover, the Active and Assisted Living JP (AAL) will continue to support market-oriented research and SMEs, and work in tandem with the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing to ensure the wider dissemination of best practices.

4. To make EU a stronger global player in healthcare research. This orientation is achieved through:

- The Public-Public Partnerships on 'European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership' addresses clinical trials, diagnostics and delivery optimisation for poverty-related and neglected infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria). For 2014 – 2023, its budget raises to € 1.36 billion, with an EU contribution of € 683 million.
- The Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R) works to improve the global research response to a potential outbreak of a new or re-emerging infectious disease.
- The programme-level cooperation schemes with third countries such as Canada, China, Australia or US. Those collaborations promote the excellence of EU research, implement commonly-defined objectives, support innovative projects and deliver common guidelines and best practices. In total, 8 of those programmes have been set up, including the international consortia for research on rare diseases, for epigenomics or for traumatic brain injuries.

There is a need to reinforce our international engagement through science diplomacy and global scientific collaboration especially in Latin America and Asia and invest more in specific initiatives such as PRIMA, SESAME and similar projects. A prompt response to outbreaks (e.g. Ebola) as well as working closely with countries and stakeholders in health research has a paramount importance.