

**Address by Hon Jo Etienne Abela, Minister for Health and Active Ageing of Malta at Council of Europe conference on Health Protection**

Secretary General of the Council of Europe Mr Alain Berset,

Regional Director Dr Kluge,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

I am very grateful for the invitation and I welcome this conference on the protection of health.

Health is a fundamental right, enshrined in the European Social Charter<sup>1</sup>. It is well nigh impossible to understate its importance within our political agenda. As a premise, the conditions that are conducive to health, disease prevention and a healthy environment need to be safeguarded.

Some of the demographic shifts that we are witnessing are not quite a sign of our times. Humankind has been through these throes several times before, I am referring to conflict and displacement, microbes, economic migration, declining fertility rates and even climatic phenomena. On the other hand, plastics, emissions, digital

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<sup>1</sup> Article 11 of the revised European Social Charter

transformation, artificial intelligence and our inexorably ageing populations are the novelties that are reshaping our existence. We must prioritise health protection and in line with my government's commitment, the strengthening of the family unit must be the cornerstone upon which our physical and mental health can flourish. With this core element in place we think it will be easier to safeguard communities, to strengthen our health systems. This is about building resilience, through a constant barrage of awareness, health promotion, immunization, screening, a solid primary care system and social assistance.

By extension, a resilient society breeds resilient healthcare workers. The WHO's Mental Health of Nurses and Doctors (MeND) study shows one in three (doctors and nurses in Europe) face depression or anxiety. These numbers are more than statistics – they are a clear call to protect the protectors. We must act on the study's recommendations and ensure that those who care for others are supported, valued, and cared for themselves.

In other words I am talking about resilience that begins with prevention. Malta's NCD Prevention Framework (2025-2035), amongst other things, targets obesity, alcohol and tobacco harm, and mental health needs. It fully aligns with the SDGs, WHO Best Buys, and EU strategies, and it puts stronger regulation, better education, and earlier screening at the heart of our public health effort.

Equity and governance should be the guiding principles that drive progress. We are integrating NCD prevention across government, building workforce capacity, promoting health literacy and protecting policymaking from commercial influence.

Ensuring the quality and safety of medical products requires robust regulation. We support the Council's efforts against falsified medicines and for pharmaceutical transparency. At the same time, while we should simplify and encourage the production of medicines and medical devices within Europe, it would be short-sighted not to look beyond our borders for collaboration.. Small markets like ours stand to gain from joint procurement mechanisms which would safeguard – a practical way to ensure equality of access and affordability.

In the digital era, our responsibility extends beyond traditional boundaries. Malta's Presidency<sup>2</sup> priorities - protecting children and combating dis – and mis-information<sup>3</sup> - are public health imperatives.

Digital technologies and AI are reshaping health systems and patient rights. Simultaneously, misinformation about vaccines, medications and wellness erodes trust and influences harmful behaviours. While investment in fact-checking has its place in the short term, the real, long-term solution lies in building digital health literacy — starting with our children.. But the approach has to be coordinated at regional, if not global level to be effective, with leadership from bodies like the

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<sup>2</sup> May to Nov 2025

<sup>3</sup> *High-level Conference on Building Democratic Resilience to Disinformation*, held in Malta in Sept 2025 with a focus on the pertinent role of digital citizenship education to foster critical thinking and combat misinformation in addition to examining differences experienced across generations

Council of Europe. A word of warning about the digital divide in older persons. Let us not assume that older persons are at all conversant with apps and QR codes. It would be a disservice to this vulnerable and plentiful subset of society to apply hard and fast digital rules. That is why I firmly believe it would be a mistake to abolish traditional medicine package inserts in favour of QR codes alone.

Beyond concerns about sexual abuse and sexual violence, as highlighted by the Maltese Presidency on the anniversary of the Lanzarote Convention<sup>4</sup>, children and adolescents today face a digital ecosystem saturated with unhealthy advertising and persuasive marketing. Protecting them online is a public health necessity.

Every child deserves to grow up well-informed, safe, and empowered in the digital age. Innovation must serve their best interests - with health, privacy and dignity at its core.

We support the Council's cooperation with the WHO and the European Commission to monitor digital exposure and integrate health misinformation and digital health literacy into broader efforts on disinformation and democratic resilience.

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<sup>4</sup> The Maltese Presidency has prioritised child protection, especially against sexual violence, considering emerging threats from digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence. *Ministers responsible for Social Policy, Family, and Children's Rights gathered in Malta in June 2025 to mark the 15th anniversary of the Lanzarote Convention, reaffirming the commitment to safeguarding children's rights.*

Let us move forward with the conviction that health protection is a shared responsibility - one that demands vigilance, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to the rights and well-being of every individual.

Thank you for your attention. (519 words)