



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Council of Europe Conference on Health Protection Outcome Document

The Conference aimed to promote a shared understanding of the Council of Europe's holistic, rights-based and ethical approach to protecting health, and to explore how this approach can be strengthened in a changing public health landscape marked by scientific, technological, environmental and social challenges.

Building on long-standing Council of Europe (CoE) legal standards including the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter (ESC), and specialised conventions participants reaffirmed that health protection is both a human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social justice.

The right to protection of health, enshrined in Article 11 of the ESC, remains one of the most comprehensive human rights provisions on health at international level. This right entails securing the best possible state of health for all and protecting individuals from avoidable risks arising from environmental, social and technological factors. Many judgements of the European Court of Human Rights further contribute to the objective of health protection which encompasses not only access to health care but also the social, environmental and occupational determinants of health.

Despite significant progress, substantial and evolving challenges in health protection persist across Europe and beyond particularly in ensuring accessibility and equality specially for vulnerable groups and in guaranteeing availability and reliability of medical products and healthcare services. These challenges are further exacerbated by demographic shifts, including ageing populations; digital transformation, creating both opportunities and disparities; conflicts and humanitarian crises, disrupting healthcare systems and access to care; rising addiction rates, increasing exposure to health risks, and spread of mis- and disinformation, eroding public trust and undermining evidence-based decision-making.

Protecting health is a shared responsibility requiring sustained political will, cross-sectoral cooperation, innovative, and human rights-based solutions. It also requires coordinated action across multiple sectors including human rights, social protection, education, bioethics, the environment, youth, and sport.

Rooted in human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the CoE promotes such a holistic, intersectoral and ethical approach to health protection. Its multidisciplinary framework provides a unique platform for integrating these dimensions. Through its legal instruments, monitoring bodies, and networks of expertise, the CoE supports member States in upholding standards, cooperation, and accountability.

Key Directions for Action:

a. Strengthening the implementation of legal standards

- Reinforce implementation of Article 11 of the ESC
- Ensure execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments, in line with the Reykjavík Declaration commitment to resolve systemic human-rights problems.
- Promote ratification and effective implementation of health-related CoE instruments including the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (Oviedo Convention), the Convention on the Counterfeiting of Medical Products and similar Crimes involving Threats to Public Health (Medicrime Convention) and the Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (Santiago Convention).

b. Ensuring Equitable, Affordable, and Inclusive Healthcare

- Guarantee equal access to quality health services for children, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, Roma and travelers, migrants, refugees, and LGBTI persons.
- Address intersectional discrimination and ensure equitable access to mental health and reproductive health services.
- Strengthen local and regional systems to close territorial gaps and prevent “medical deserts.”
- Support the development of healthcare infrastructures

c. Safeguarding Patient Rights, Quality and Safety

- Uphold respect for consent, privacy, and patient safety. Support the EDQM's science-based standards to ensure the quality, safety, and equitable access to medicines and health products. Reinforce crisis preparedness, supply chain resilience, and access to safe vaccines and treatments. Promote responsible AI use in healthcare, ensuring transparency, accountability, and fairness.
- Support the Pompidou Group efforts to combat drug trafficking and tackle addictions including online addictions
- Support the fight against doping in sport

d. Gender Equality, Youth, and Children's Rights

- Implement the Gender Equality Strategy 2024–2027, ensuring equal access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Reinforce the health sector's role in preventing and responding to gender-based violence under the Istanbul Convention.
- Support youth mental health, participation, and co-design of services.
- Promote child-friendly and participatory approaches in health decision-making, in line with the Lanzarote Convention and the Strategy for the Rights of the Child.

e. Health, Environment, and Ethics

- Integrate environmental and climate considerations into health strategies, addressing the social determinants of health such as clean water, energy, housing and safe environments.
- Strengthen ethical and transparent governance in biomedical innovation and digital health, guided by the Oviedo Convention and related instruments.
- Foster health literacy, promote human rights education programme and combat misinformation to rebuild public trust.

There is a need for stronger cooperation among CoE institutions, including the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Commissioner for Human Rights as well as monitoring bodies to ensure coherence and synergy and with international partners notably the WHO, EU, and United Nations to align efforts on human rights and health protection while highlighting the importance of civil society, academia, and professional networks role in order to enhance participation, innovation, and public trust. Regular dialogues and knowledge exchanges will allow to share good practices and monitor progress toward rights-based, equitable health systems.

In conclusion, safeguarding and protecting health is both a human rights obligation and an investment in Europe's democratic future. It is a shared responsibility to transform commitments into action ensuring that solidarity, equality and trust remain the foundation of health for all. Implementation of these commitments through standards, education, innovation, and solidarity, reaching out to all citizens, will ensure that no one is left behind. The forthcoming New Democratic Pact offers a unique opportunity to strengthen the connection between commitments and implementation anchoring health protection at the heart of Europe's democratic renewal.