



Ministerial Conference “Women’s health: a life-course approach Rome, 2-3 October 2014

Summary of sessions

The Ministerial Conference was an important opportunity for discussing women’s health issues in different stages of their lives and for sharing information and experiences in this field with a view to shaping a common vision as to the policies and priorities in promoting gender health.

Women in their role of caregivers of their families are potential leaders for the promotion of healthy lifestyles throughout the course of their lives. Healthy lifestyles was a common theme to all the topics discussed at the Ministerial Conference because it is of crucial importance for the prevention of non-transmissible chronic disorders and also for preconception health and for the prevention of one-third of the tumours that affect women.

It was agreed that the promotion of efficacious healthy lifestyles requires multisectoral policies that envisage the involvement of not only the individual but also of the family, schools and the local community. In particular, the focus was on the importance of nutrition and physical activity in children and teenagers and on how the latter can be facilitated also by adapting the spaces available in our towns to promote children’s autonomy in particular.

Investing in young people is of critical importance also to protect the sexual health of the whole population and, in this connection, adequate information and education about sex and intimate relationships are indispensable for promoting appropriate relationships between genders and awareness of the health risks that may undermine future fertility. Considering the fact that in all Member Countries the age of first time sex has dropped to 15 from 18, a number of educational initiatives are necessary to promote responsible behaviour among young people so as to decrease the incidence of sexually transmitted infections that are often the cause of cervical cancers and infertility, and increase their skills for responsible procreation. Sexually transmitted infections, that are particularly widespread among young people (<25 years), and HIV infections are a huge public health problem because of the long-term complications they entail and for their impact on sexual and reproductive health. A criticality that emerged was that people do not know that the use of contraceptive pills, which in any case are more widely used than condoms, does not protect from sexually transmitted infection. However, HPV vaccination programs, where appropriately implemented, help contain HPV16/18 infections in sexually active young women.

More data need to be gathered in order to gain a better understanding of the situation and identify the population groups at highest risk, and since there is little knowledge about STIs, action needs to be taken to change lifestyles and sexual conduct. Italy’s positive experience with the *Consultori familiari* (CF) - family planning centres was presented; the CFs are places where families are brought together through a holistic approach that also includes education for young people.

Special attention was attached to the specific disorders that undermine women’s sexual life and the quality of the relationship with their partners such as endometriosis, vulvodynia and interstitial cystitis. Making rapid diagnoses and having specific counselling skills to appropriately manage these situations requires health workers to receive special training that was considered to be a priority.



Among the problems of post-menopausal women, the issue of osteoporosis was discussed, and the close connection between prevention and adequate lifestyle was emphasized.

It was also pointed out that it is important for Countries where best practices are in place to share their experience with the other Countries and the hope was also expressed that highly specialized centres where standard care is delivered should be set up. This could be a recommendation to be put to the European Commission.

Maternal and neonatal health was confirmed to be a top public health priority.

Pregnancy, delivery and postpartum are moments in women's and infants' lives where special care is needed and it should be delivered starting from the pre-conception period with full respect for mother-child rights. All participants acknowledged the importance of empowering couples facing the new condition of parenthood: being parents who are responsible for their children's health.

The prospect of giving birth is a very positive phase in women's lives and they are more willing to give up unhealthy lifestyles. Also the importance of protecting women's mental health was pointed out along with equal access to care for all vulnerable groups that include migrants, protection from exposure to environmental pollutants, and improving family policies to avoid unwanted pregnancies and voluntary terminations of pregnancy.

Significant differences were highlighted among Member States as to the data on maternal mortality related to causes that in many cases could be avoided. Advanced data collection systems were called for on maternal mortality and morbidity.

Several speakers focused on the importance of breast-feeding considered an irreplaceable practice for the mother and child's short and long term health. In general, the importance of enhancing the role of obstetrics in assisting physiological pregnancies was confirmed.

All Member States recognized that the increase in maternal age at delivery is a risk factor for reproduction outcomes; appropriate policies should be adopted to encourage women to bear children at a biologically more appropriate age. The main reasons for this trend are the fact of postponing pregnancy to a later age, the increase in obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption, the mentioned sexually transmitted diseases, changes in the quality of sperm, and disorders due to exposure to chemical agents. It would be necessary to set up a system for monitoring endocrine disorders caused by chemical problems.

Various forms of safe and effective treatment are currently available for infertility. There are major differences among Member States as to availability, access to treatment, legislative aspects and reimbursement schemes (transnational reproductive care). Investing in reproductive health means investing in the wellbeing of future generations. The free movement of people among Countries makes it necessary to adopt successful health strategies to prevent the diffusion of diseases and other reproductive problems, also in future years.

Reference was also made to prematurity. Every year some 10% of births in Europe are preterm. The survival rate of preterm infants is constantly improving thanks to scientific advances; however, parent and health worker associations and organizations do not focus their attention only on methods for ensuring the survival of preterm infants but they also examine the options available for preventing preterm births as an essential aspect of women's health; they also seek to ensure that such children may have a better start in life and that long-term consequences as for instance neurological, respiratory and growth disorders be prevented. In order to accomplish these objectives, the European Union and its Member States should: recognize maternal and neonatal health as a public health priority, in particular



the health of preterm infants and newborn with disorders; recognize the potential long-term consequences of preterm births; deal with the inequalities in maternal and neonatal health among Member States and within each Country; perform audits, implement policies and improve treatment standards, monitor outcomes; adopt standardized data sets at European level on the outcomes of pregnancy and preterm births; and finally, invest in research so as to solve the challenges of preterm births and of their long-term consequences.

The last session of the Conference, dedicated to women's cancers started with the announcement that cancer is the cause of 23% of women's death rate. Also in this case prevention through appropriate lifestyles plays a critical role. In women, being overweight and obese is associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular disorders, hypertension, breast and endometrial cancer, musculoskeletal disorders and complications during pregnancy and delivery. In addition screening programs may represent an important opportunity for the promotion of health in women throughout the course of their lives. Given the increasing incident of cancer, special reference was made to the protection of fertility in oncological patients.

Special emphasis was placed by all Countries on communication that transversally affects all the themes that were discussed and that is a fundamental instrument for making sure that health messages reach out to all target populations. The right modalities suited to each target need to be identified also by using the new technologies and "peer education" instruments. Indeed it was pointed out that for teenagers and for mothers, working with peer groups is the instrument that ensures the best results in terms of individual empowerment.

Also the gathering of reliable and comparable data through periodical sampling surveys and the possibility of linking current information flows must be furthered in order to appropriately orientate prevention actions and assess their impact.

In conclusion, if we want the new generations to be healthy, it is indispensable to step up the financial resources that Member State dedicate to prevention and health promotion, that on average are only 3% at the moment. Indeed this is a fundamental investment for reducing the costs of health services.

This conference was a starting point for working at European and international level on women's health. Indeed WHO will take into account its conclusions for the next Committee meeting of the European region scheduled for September 2015.

The topic of "Women's health" was proposed by Uruguay, Chile and Brazil as the agenda for the 2015 WHO World Assembly.