European brief

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**Brexit Update**

Following the Conservative victory in the UK’s General Election, and the likelihood that this will lead to the swift adoption of the Draft Withdrawal Agreement, we have begun to consider how the (non-binding) revised political declaration can be developed to mitigate Brexit’s impact upon the European medical profession during the future relationship between the EU and UK. On the EU side, it is important to note the European Council’s post-election statement which:

- reiterates its commitment to an orderly withdrawal on the basis of the Withdrawal Agreement and calls for its timely ratification and effective implementation
- reconfirms its desire to establish as close as possible a future relationship with the UK in line with the Political Declaration

As such, and whilst deploring the damage that Brexit will do the health of the UK, we have been meeting with MEPs and stakeholders from across Europe to consider how best to ensure that the non-binding political declaration can be transformed into legislative solutions which prioritise our members’ interests and the patients they serve.

With specific regard to the post-Brexit provision of cross-border healthcare services in Ireland, this includes working to ensure that the PEACE PLUS, a new cross-border EU funding programme for the 2021-2027 period, continues to support related projects.

Whilst initial signs are promising – its Policy Objective 4, A More Social Europe, focuses “on increasing access to quality healthcare” by “ensuring equal access to health care through developing infrastructure, including primary care” – we will be working with partners in the UK, Ireland and at EU level to ensure that the programme provides sufficient funding for the delivery of these objectives.

Accordingly, and working with colleagues in BMA NI, we will be responding to the ongoing stakeholder engagement survey.

Further details about our extensive work on Brexit are available here.

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**State of Health in the EU Report Reveals UK Falling Behind**

This month saw the publication of the latest “State of Health in the EU” Report – an analysis of the trends and developments across EU healthcare systems which is published every other year.
This year’s report highlights increasing rates of vaccine hesitancy (particularly influenza) across the bloc, wide variation in personal expenditure on healthcare, as well as persistent inequalities in preventable mortality rates between Eastern and Western Europe. Likewise, its analysis of the UK’s health system does not provide for happy reading. The report highlights that NHS spending is markedly lower than in other high-income countries in the bloc and that workforce shortages present a key challenge for the resilience of the healthcare system, particularly given the UK’s reliance on migration and the potential consequences of Brexit for the workforce. Finally, the report highlights that gains in life expectancy have slowed markedly over the past decade, with mortality rates from preventable and treatable causes greater than in other high-income countries, and increasing disparities among socio-economic groups.

In reaction to these findings, BMA Chair Chaand Nagpaul issued the following statement:

“This backs up what the BMA and doctors on the front line have been saying loud and clear for some time: the NHS is understaffed, under-funded and buckling under unprecedented pressure. As one of the world’s richest countries, it is shameful to see how we compare with similar nations. As this report underlines, Britain must increase its health spending significantly if it is to provide UK patients with the quality and safe care they expect and need and put the NHS on a sustainable footing for the future.”

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**Croatian Presidency Health Priorities Announced**

With Croatia assuming the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU in January for the first half of 2020, the State Secretary for Health has announced the country’s six month mandate will focus on delivering lifelong health care for an ageing demographic, and strengthening member state cooperation on organ donation and transplants.

Speaking at the EU Health Council in Brussels, State Secretary Tomislav Dulibić described how his country is one of the leaders in organ transplantation and donation, and can therefore “contribute to maintaining the political momentum” to develop a model of cooperation among member states to help the most vulnerable groups of patients.

Ahead of Croatia assuming the Presidency, BMA Chair Chaand Nagpaul wrote to the Health Minister to highlight the profound repercussions Brexit could have for the European medical profession and its ongoing ability to provide high quality healthcare across the continent. He specifically drew attention to the need for continued mutual recognition of professional qualifications in order to protect the 200 Croatian qualified doctors currently licensed in the UK.

The BMA European Office will be scheduling meetings in due course with those representatives of the Croatian government in Brussels in order to ensure that mitigating Brexit’s impact on UK and EU healthcare systems remains a top priority over the next six months of negotiations.

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**New European Commission Begins Work on Cancer and Climate Priorities**

The new European Commission (EC) was formally sworn in at the beginning of this month and has already made a number of key policy announcements.

At a recent event in Brussels attended by the BMA’s European Office, new Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides announced that her EU Beating Cancer Strategy will be launched early next year and will have a specific focus on prevention. The strategy will take a horizontal, “health in all policies” approach, encompassing a wide range of legislative areas such as marketing, food labelling, funding, and research programmes.

New EC President Von Der Leyen has also outlined plans for the much-anticipated “European Green Deal”.

Speaking shortly after the European Parliament (EP) voted to declare a climate emergency, the new President announced she will seek to introduce a new climate law setting a target of net-zero emissions by 2050 and a new EU tariff on carbon-intensive imports by 2021.
Another aspect which could prove to be of particular relevance in the context of any future UK-EU trade deal is the proposal “to make the respect of the Paris agreement an essential element for all future comprehensive trade agreements.”

The BMA will continue to build upon our existing European and international advocacy work on this issue, which has most recently included coordinating the adoption of an urgent resolution at the 2019 WMA (World Medical Association) General Assembly declaring a climate emergency. Whatever the outcome of Brexit, we will work to ensure that the voice of UK doctors is prominent in any international effort to tackle the climate crisis.

Launch of New European Forum to Tackle Antimicrobial Resistance

Following the European Court of Auditors’ conclusion that EU action on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) has brought little progress to date, twelve MEPs from across the political spectrum have come together to launch a new EP AMR Interest Group to step up EU efforts to tackle the health risk.

BMA Chair Chaand Nagpaul responded to the launch of the new group by alerting its founding members to the multifaceted ways in which Brexit could threaten the EU’s ability to tackle serious health threats such as AMR. Writing to each of the twelve founders, he repeated calls for both UK and EU negotiating sides to prioritise continued health security coordination, specifically around emergency preparedness planning, risk assessment, management and communication, and support continued collaboration around policy and research.

In other AMR-related news, the EP has this month started work on a Draft Resolution for further measures to prevent pharmaceutical pollution in the environment – recognised as a contributing factor to the spread of AMR.

The EC published a document in March proposing a number of new EU actions, including promoting new guidelines for, and best practice exchanges amongst, healthcare professionals on the prudent use of pharmaceuticals and their environmental impact.

The new EP Resolution goes further in calling for the development of EU guidance on the role of procurement policy in promoting greener pharmaceuticals; and the introduction of a comprehensive monitoring system of the use of antibiotics within human medicine, similar to the system already established within agriculture.

The BMA will continue to build collaboration with our European partners to ensure that UK doctors form part of any future concerted international effort to tackle the spread of AMR.

Poor Nutritional Value of Packaged Foods in EU under the Spotlight

A new study published last month found that between half to two thirds of packaged food products sold on the EU market, including in the UK, fall far short of the EU and WHQ nutritional standards.

The study highlights the importance of nutrient profiles as a means of stimulating the reformulation of food products. A group of EU countries and public health stakeholders has already begun work advocating for specific reformulation goals at the EU level.

The BMA has worked extensively on the issue of the nutrition, both domestically and at the EU level, with the European Office having previously lobbied EU policymakers to tighten restrictions of the marketing of unhealthy products to children.

The BMA is also a member of the European Public Health Alliance’s Healthy Marketing Stakeholder Group, which brings together stakeholders at the EU level to collaborate on questions of marketing regulation around nutrition, addiction and non-communicable diseases.

Regardless of the outcome of Brexit, we will continue to work with such partners to continue to drive up higher public health standards across the continent.