



# European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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## Medical Students in Preventive Healthcare

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*The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.*

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## **Problem statement.**

Preventive healthcare aims to increase health and limit disease by averting the occurrence of disease (primary prevention), early detection of disease (secondary prevention) and the healing from or remission of disease (tertiary prevention) (Starfield et al., 2008). In 2018, only 2.8% of healthcare spending of EU member states benefited preventive healthcare (Eurostat, 2021) even though it has been suggested that investing in preventive healthcare would be a cost-effective answer to rising healthcare costs in Europe (Barnfield et al., 2019). Accordingly, there is an opportunity for medical students to offset this breach in the health systems by early involvement in raising health awareness not only in their studying environment but also in their local communities.

One of the most powerful and cost-effective preventive measures is vaccination. In fact, it averts 2-3 million deaths per year and, if we were able to have higher coverage of the population, it would avert 1.5 million more deaths (CPME, 2021). At the same time, the success in infectious diseases control throughout the last decades will not continue without efforts in limiting antimicrobial resistance. Yet, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) pose by far the greatest risk to the health of Europeans, with diseases of the circulatory system accounting for 37% of deaths in 2017 and cancer accounting for 26% of deaths, respectively (OECD/European Union, 2020). The greatest potential of preventive healthcare in Europe is therefore to be found in lifestyle intervention to reduce risk factors, screening programs to detect NCDs early such as European colorectal cancer screening programs that have very successfully and consistently decreased incidences (Cardoso et al., 2021), and programs to sustain the health of those living with NCDs. A gap in the prevention sector remains with regard to mental health and the total absence of preventive psychiatry in the medical curriculum, where the training emphasises interventions rather than psychiatric preventive care (Jiloha, 2017).

However, accessibility of preventive healthcare has been unequally distributed among populations, with those of higher education and income utilising preventive services more frequently (Jusot et al., 2011). Subsequently, those most affected by premature death are likely to benefit the least from preventive current measures (World Health Organization, 2017). Unsatisfactory use of preventive health services may be attributed to insufficient health literacy (Stormacq et al., 2019), referring to the ability of individuals to make informed decisions about their health. Health literacy differs widely within Europe and between socioeconomic groups (Sørensen et al., 2015), resulting in varying health behaviours and use of preventive services (Stormacq et al., 2019).

Evidence from the United States at the same time suggests that physicians are currently not equipped to respond to the changing health landscape of the western world, as medical curricula fail to include preventive care and lifestyle medicine (Rao et al., 2020). The complete absence of corresponding data from Europe implies a significant lack of awareness of the challenges connected to inadequate medical education in the area of prevention. It is therefore not only highly relevant to adapt existing services to their target populations and settings (Starfield et al., 2008) and make them more inclusive, but also to revisit the role of preventive care in medical education.

## Our view. Aim

EMSA believes that preventive healthcare is vital for health promotion and leads to an overall improvement in health outcomes (Barnfield et al. 2018). Thus, it should be accessible, affordable and equitable for all. Moreover, preventive healthcare is highly cost-effective and reduces overall burden (Barnfield et al., 2019).

As medical students and future medical professionals, EMSA advocates for more and better incorporation of preventive health education in medical schools and in curricula in areas including, but not limited to, preventive psychiatry, sexual health, nutrition, addiction, lifestyle and public health. Education regarding preventive healthcare is crucial to holistic education for future healthcare professionals (Rao et al., 2020). Moreover, EMSA highlights the importance of training knowledgeable capable healthcare professionals who practise to the full extent of their competency. Having advocated for medical student participation in preventive health care through policy papers in the past, we also choose to continue our efforts and observe our exemplary role in promoting and advocating for medical students in preventive healthcare and organising activities to further promote and develop skills regarding preventive healthcare.

## Recommendations

EMSA calls on the World Health Organisation (WHO) to:

- Prioritise the development and support of preventive healthcare programs;
- Invest in funding, adequate financial resources or grants for preventive healthcare research, prioritising prevention programs in healthcare;
- In the creation of new programs, include the promotion of preventive psychiatry by developing international and standardised guidance and targets regarding preventive psychiatry.

EMSA calls on European Institutions to:

- Support preventive healthcare programs by developing an EU Action Plan for better cardiovascular health and adhere to the existing Beating Cancer Plan;
- Invest in adequate financial resources and grants for preventive healthcare research, prioritising prevention programs in healthcare;
- In the creation of new programs, include the promotion of preventive psychiatry;
- Fund opportunities for medical students to participate actively in Preventive Healthcare programs.

EMSA calls on the European Member States and National Governments to:

- Develop national prevention action plans on the topics of Cardiovascular Diseases and, Obesity, Infectious Diseases and Vaccine Hesitancy as well as Preventive Psychiatry and to include specific health targets in these action plans;
- Launch evidence-based screening programs to maximise efficiency and reduce their harm; • Invest in funding, adequate financial resources or grants for preventive healthcare research, prioritising prevention programs in healthcare;

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- Improve access to Primary Healthcare facilities for populations at risk, including migrants, refugees, homeless people, isolated communities and rural populations, by including preventive services in universal health coverage and extending them to remote areas;
- Make essential preventive services free of charge including, but not limited to STI testing, dental check-ups, yearly check-ups with general practitioners and cancer screenings;
- Create opportunities for medical students to participate actively in Preventive Healthcare programs in their own country.
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EMSA calls on Medical Schools and Universities to:

- Improve the Medical Curriculum with theoretical and practical lessons regarding Preventive Healthcare, to equip medical students with the knowledge and enable them to take part in Preventive Healthcare interventions such as cardiovascular screenings and lectures to improve Health Literacy;
- Include preventive psychiatry, epidemiology of preventive healthcare, public health, social determinants of health, nutrition, sexual health and communication strategies in the medical curriculum;
- Organise activities and conferences with medical professionals on World Health Day (7th of April) to raise awareness on the topic, where subjects would be represented by, but not limited to day-to-day health knowledge to sexual and reproductive health.

EMSA calls on EMSA members to:

- Organise lectures and workshops in preventive healthcare issues, such as cardiovascular screenings and health education topics like mental health, sexual health, addictions, vaccine hesitancy and promoting healthy lifestyles, to enable their students to share this knowledge with the general population;
- Learn about vulnerable and isolated populations in their countries and promote these activities in those communities as well;
- Organise cardiovascular screenings locally, targeting older population more vulnerable to these diseases;
- Promote activities in local schools where medical students can use peer-teaching to increase the health literacy of the younger population in topics like mental health, sexual health, addictions and promoting healthy lifestyles;
- Celebrate world health day (7th of April) by organising conferences with medical professionals to draw attention to the subject of preventive health;
- Raise awareness about the importance of preventive healthcare through the EMSA social media pages to engage virtually with students and by sharing posts with useful resources.

EMSA calls on medical students to:

- Participate in the activities promoted by their FMOs;
- Share relevant information on preventive healthcare and health literacy in their own social media pages;

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- Get involved in preventive healthcare programs that are developed by other institutions, such as government organisations or non-profit organisations;
- Organise presentations and activities about preventive health (in kindergartens, middle schools and high schools), especially by going back to their hometown to broaden the impact of their activities from a local to a national one.

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