
Towards a healthy life course for all



The importance of children's hospitals in creating a healthier Europe

The European Children's Hospitals Organisation
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Executive Summary

An urgent need to improve child health

There is a pressing need for governments and health systems to focus on the health of children and young people. In fact, multiple organisations including the WHO, UNICEF, and the Lancet are calling for a renewed focus on child and adolescent health. The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need to strengthen all health systems, including those for children. Children and young people are also calling for action, demanding that we act now to create a world where they can thrive. It is up to all of us not to fail them.

A child's right to health

All children and young people have the right to the highest attainable standard of health and to the healthiest possible start in life. These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child and are non-negotiable. This means developing health systems and policies that:

- Offer young people the same level of high quality that adults receive.
- Ensure access to specialists that meets their unique needs.
- Invest in research on diseases unique to the paediatric population.

ECHO: Working across Europe to improve child health

Children's hospitals are part of the solution to improving child health, both now and in the future. By caring for the youngest patients, children's hospital help set kids on the course for good health that lasts well into adulthood. The European Children's Hospitals Organisation (ECHO) is a new organisation made up of leading tertiary care children's hospitals across Europe aimed at leveraging the power of children's hospitals to promote and protect child health. By bringing these hospitals together, ECHO aims at establishing the pan-national infrastructure required to improve access, quality and efficiency of healthcare.

Children's hospitals play a critical role in advancing child health.

Children's hospitals are an important part of the public health system that:



Provide a range of services, from primary to highly specialized care.



Ensure communities have a highly skilled paediatric workforce.



Treat the majority of children and young people with complex chronic and rare diseases.



Drive innovation that benefits children and adult patients.

The future could be bright: recent advances in child health

Although there are many health challenges facing children and young people, there is also reason for optimism. Infant mortality has decreased, and children are surviving into adulthood with diseases that used to be untreatable, like cystic fibrosis, cancer, and congenital heart disease. Children's hospitals have been instrumental in many of these advances. Paradoxically, past improvements in child health have contributed to current challenges around providing care for increasingly complex patients.

An ageing population increases the need for excellence in paediatrics

Investing in child health is the right thing to do for children and young people but is also good for

communities and the economy. As the population of Europe continues ageing, children able to reach adult age in good health will be even more important to society. In addition to pressure on health systems, more will be expected of caregivers. For families caring for children and young people with complex or chronic illnesses this will be especially demanding.

Health system challenges to improving child health in Europe

Children and young people face global threats to their health, but there are also local challenges. Barriers to quality improvement, issues with access, and a lack of focus on diseases specific to children and young people all impact the health of children and young people in Europe. Taken together, these factors create an urgent need to focus on and invest in the health of children and young people. The box at the right summarises challenges to improving child health in Europe.

Solutions to global challenges in child health

Ensuring all children in Europe have access to the best possible care will require pan-European collaboration between hospitals, policy makers and legislators. By working together, we can develop solutions to the most pressing issues facing children today (Figure 1). Strategies include:

Summary of health system challenges to improving child health in Europe

Barriers to high quality care

- Limited paediatric pan-European data available for quality improvement
- Insufficient support for paediatric patients transitioning to adult services

Ongoing issues with access

- Geographic variation in health outcomes
- Shortages in highly specialised paediatric healthcare providers

Limited investment in child-specific conditions

- New therapies are needed for child-specific conditions
- Inadequate reimbursement to support complexity of caring for complex and rare conditions

Improving the quality of healthcare

- **Address the data gap** through the definition of comparable paediatric data sets and investment in data infrastructure and analytics that support the application of artificial intelligence in paediatrics.
- **Improve transition from paediatric to adult care** by supporting the identification and implementation of best practices, including new reimbursement schemes.

Ensuring equitable access

- **Reduce paediatric workforce shortages.** Children deserve access to highly skilled paediatric healthcare providers, no matter where they live. This means having access to subspecialists and paediatric nurses.
- **Eliminate geographic disparities in health outcomes** by ensuring all children's hospitals can provide the best clinical practices and have access to highly specialised paediatric healthcare providers. Patients should also have access to the care provided by centres of excellence.

Supporting research targeting children and young people

- **Incentivise and promote the development of new therapies for paediatric-specific diseases.** Rare diseases and childhood cancer are areas of research that need particular attention. This should be accompanied by new incentives to help bring new drugs to market.
- **Invest in paediatric focused research** that includes basic, clinical and health services research.

It is possible to create a world where all children of today and tomorrow, and especially those afflicted with complex chronic or rare diseases, can thrive and meet their full potential. Nevertheless, there is no time to lose—it is up to all of us to act now and put the health of children first and foremost.

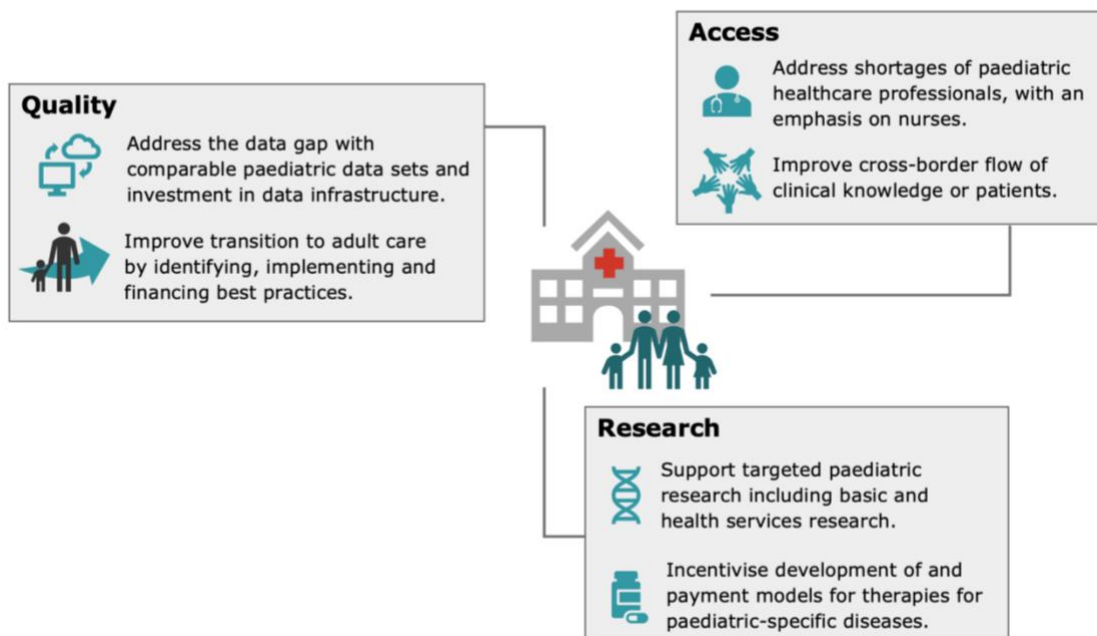


Figure 1. Health system initiatives to support child health in Europe