

Declaration

Health and environment: time to act ***Better health through a better environment - it's up to everyone***

The International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM) and its members welcome the commitment made by European governments to reduce the effects on health by environmental threats, in the declaration made by the 5th Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health held in Parma on 10th-12th March 2010¹.

This subject has never been more topical in a world in which the environment is increasingly occupying a place at the top of the agenda. From the visible effect of natural disasters, air pollution or heatwaves on health to the insidious long-term effects of chemicals or other substances in the air, food, the working environment, **the environment is increasingly involved as a factor to be taken into consideration in health matters**. In addition to this, questions about electromagnetic fields, genetically modified organisms and nanoparticles, whose long-term effects on health are still unknown, are regularly in the news. In actual fact the WHO reminds us that almost a quarter of all illnesses in the world are caused by environmental exposure which could be avoided.

So, on the initiative of and working in partnership with the Belgian Liberal Mutual Benefit Societies, the AIM held an international conference on the subject of "Environment and Health" in Brussels on 4th June. The AIM and the participants believe that ***promoting better health through a better environment is up to everyone***.

Indeed, it is a **shared responsibility**. We need to take the right decisions today so that we can protect our environment and promote a healthy, sustainable global environment for the sake of future generations and their health. **Solidarity between generations** lies at the heart of the concept of sustainable development and health.

The AIM recommends that **mutual benefit societies** should make a more visible, clearer commitment to the understanding and prevention of environmental effects. They are in a completely credible position in terms of taking action and they have a responsibility towards their members and patients to do so. It is recommended that they incorporate the **education and prevention on environmental health** aspect into all awareness-raising and information activities in which they engage with their members and also with regard to chronic disease management initiatives.

Mutual benefit societies should **play a part in the national authorities and bodies** involved in the establishment, monitoring and assessment of **environmental health policies**.

Finally, mutual benefit societies should strengthen or develop a **sustainable development policy** for their own strategies.

Health professionals are also affected. In most cases they are not given enough adequate training on health questions relating to the environment and feel poorly equipped to deal with the diversity and complexity of the questions they face. The AIM recommends both offering **better** basic and continuing **training** on these questions for health staff and training larger numbers of **environmental health specialists**.

In order to act and take preventive actions, first of all we need to understand **environmental health questions**. In order to do so, the AIM stresses that these concepts must be made an integral part of **all levels of education** offered to children and students.

As for the **national**, European and international **authorities**, the AIM stresses that the **promises of commitment made in Parma** must be translated into **real actions**. The social and economic crisis must not slow down greater prevention, education, and integration of environmental health into all policies. On the contrary, a genuine implementation of **environmental health activities** is an **investment** which may improve people's health, which is a key factor in improving the economy and creating jobs. The AIM stresses that the **coordination** of activities at **national** level must be strengthened, along with the institutional coordination framework within the **European** environment and health Ministerial Board and the monitoring of implementation through the Environment and Health Task Force in order to be genuinely effective.

In order to persuade the decision-makers and assess the importance of these questions and the programmes developed, the AIM recommends **investing** more in **research into environmental health**, as the study of environmental factors likely to have an impact on health, along with the fight against them and the development of health impact studies in the policies of the various sectors which have an effect on the environment.

Brussels, 3rd June 2010

About the AIM

The International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM), created in 1950, brings together 42 national federations of autonomous health insurance and social protection bodies in 27 countries, all operating according to the principles of solidarity and not-for-profit orientation. They provide coverage against sickness and other social welfare risks to more than 170 million people, either by participating directly in the management of compulsory health insurance, by providing voluntary health insurance or by delivering health care and social services directly through their own facilities.

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ⁱ Parma Declaration on Environment and Health 12th March 2010
<http://www.euro.who.int/document/E93618.pdf>