

Open Science for Health: Shaping the New Framework Programme

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Health Action International (HAI) and Commons Network were joined last week in a packed room at the European Parliament by European Union lawmakers, policy-makers and other civil society groups to debate the challenges and opportunities ahead for the medical research and development (R&D) system.

Our discussion on *Open Science for Health*—organised by HAI and Commons Network and hosted by MEPs, Lola Sanchez (GUE), Nessa Childers (S&D) and Michele Rivasi (Greens)—focused on the alignment of publicly funded R&D and its societal returns, all in the context of the mid-term review of [Horizon 2020](#) (H2020) and the drafting of the upcoming Framework Programme 9 (FP9).

The discussion was a mix of optimism about the possibilities for the future, and frustration that the maintenance of the status quo could continue to hinder access to needed medicines and public health. Above all, it was full of proactive engagement from all parties, mixed with a strength of feeling that came as no real surprise considering the great importance of the subject matter.

“Healthcare, as we conceive of it in Europe, is not a business, but a fundamental right”

MEP Lola Sanchez kicked off the meeting by rightly pointing out that we, as European citizens, are tired of paying twice, or even three times for a medicinal product, and called for significant returns on public investments. She said:

“It is now up to the European Commission to go beyond nice words and empty rhetoric, and politically commit, in its proposal for a Regulation on FP9, to adhere to principles of public-interest driven research and development.”

She was followed in equally strong fashion by MEP Nessa Childers, with the impassioned plea:

“Healthcare, as we conceive of it in Europe, is not a business, but a fundamental right. If we were to think of it as such, we won’t be hard pressed to conclude we are getting a bad deal on behalf of the citizens who pay and who expect quality care.”

These interventions set the tone for the rest of the discussion in what had become a standing room only event.

“Timely and open access to project results is essential for all publicly funded projects”

We heard from, among others, Erika Dueñas of the [Medicines Patent Pool](#), who explained how licensing can accelerate generic competition and laid out delinkage in action through the example of the [Life Prize](#), and Spring Gombe ([Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative](#)) who gave an interesting illustration of how collaborative research is possible, through the [Open Synthesis Network](#). It was concerning to hear from Professor Silvio Garattini (founder of the [Mario Negri Institute](#)) that researchers in EU financed studies are prohibited from accessing the results of their partners’ studies for commercial reasons. Ursula Theuretzbacher (Centre for Anti-Infective Agents) shared similar concerns over a lack of clinical trial data transparency, giving a view that timely and open access to project results is essential for all publicly funded projects. Meanwhile, Martin Pigeon ([Corporate Europe Observatory](#)) remarked that private companies took advantage of public resources to fund their own research projects, with no accessibility or affordability clauses attached.

It was clear from what we heard from speakers, and from the discussion that followed, that the drafting of FP9 must ensure:

- FP9 explores patent sharing and promotes licensing policies as tools to improve access to medical technologies. This includes a European patent pool of products developed with EU funds.
- Public investment is spent/assigned with complete transparency on the costs of research, development and production of medicinal products, with the public contribution reflected in the price of the end product.
- Prioritisation of the funding of biomedical R&D initiatives that focus on unmet public health needs and lead to products with added therapeutic value.

We firmly believe that, by involving civil society in the drafting and implementation of FP9, the European Commission will not only make it a more participatory process, but also guarantee that voices are heard that will broaden the impact and benefits of public funded research initiatives for all. As H2020 has shown, it is critical that cooperation between public and private partners is guided, first and foremost, by public interest and developed in an open and accountable way.

This is just the beginning of the process. We must now keep the momentum we have built to ensure transparency, fairness and public returns on public investments become the norm in FP9 and beyond.