

## BREXIT: RCN PRIORITY

# Addressing public health threats

### What are the issues?

The European Union (EU) plays a vital role in maintaining public health across all its member states. There are sector wide concerns that Brexit and the withdrawal of EU funding for public health measures will negatively impact the health of our population.

The EU facilitates collaboration on cross-border health threats, such as communicable diseases which can spread easily and anti-microbial resistance through the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC). The ECDC identifies and assesses risks posed to European citizens' health from infectious diseases. Their work monitors potential outbreaks and recommends early warning response systems to protect our health. It is unclear currently what the on-going relationship with ECDC will be both in terms of submission and comparison of UK data on infections/antibiotic resistance and the management of outbreaks in Europe that could impact on the UK.

The EU can legislate that member states take action on specific public health issues, such as tobacco regulation and improving air and water quality. If member states fail to take action – such as the UK's slow progress to heighten our air quality standards – then the EU can impose sanctions against the UK, which has already happened in relation to road traffic emissions for example<sup>1</sup>.

### What does this mean?

The lack of a contributory relationship to ECDC activities would exclude the UK from reporting and comparing important surveillance data on communicable diseases and health threats. This could affect the preparedness of the UK's health and social care system if a communicable disease outbreak develops and we need to respond rapidly.

In relation to EU legislation on public health,

the current EU Withdrawal Bill that the UK Government are currently working on will incorporate existing EU regulations in UK law including air quality provisions.

The RCN's concerned that these regulations could be amended after Brexit and lose their importance, without sufficient parliamentary scrutiny. It is important that the UK Government does not lose momentum and commitment on tobacco control and air quality standards after Brexit.

There is also a lack of clarity on future oversight of compliance with environmental standards in the UK as currently EU agencies have undertaken this role and we have adopted their regulations and recommendations<sup>2</sup>.

### Brexit Scorecard

The RCN has rated progress on its five priorities by RED, AMBER and GREEN.

Red indicates that there has been no firm commitment made by the UK Government on this issue and how to resolve it.

Amber indicates some UK Government commitment or statement but no agreement on practical application with the EU.

Green indicates a firm commitment from the UK Government and the EU including on practical implementation.



### RED WARNING

With less than one year to go to until Brexit, there are no details on the UK's ambitions for continued involvement with ECDC, nor on aspects of public health in the post-Brexit deal.

<sup>1</sup> BBC news, *EU Commission launches legal action over UK air quality*, available here. February 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-26257703>

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library, *Brexit and air quality*, available <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8195#fullreport>. March 2018.

## What needs to happen?

**The UK Government should make a formal agreement as part of the Brexit deal to continue to contribute and participate in the ECDC.**

Countries in the wider European Economic Area (EEA) such as Norway, have an agreement to participate, with financial contributions, despite not being members of the EU. We expect the UK Government to replicate this commitment so that we continue to benefit from cross-border disease prevention measures. The ECDC also has memoranda of understanding with disease control agencies in other major countries China and the USA, which would be beneficial to the UK<sup>3</sup>.

**The EU Withdrawal Bill should be amended to prevent the UK Government from diluting public health protections.** We believe that the UK should not only incorporate existing EU regulations into UK law, but that the EU Withdrawal Bill be amended to ensure that the UK Government does not have power to amend the legislation post-Brexit, without parliamentary and public scrutiny.

Public health policy is part of the remit of the devolved nations. Any relevant EU laws that currently fall within the competency of the devolved administrations should be transposed into Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh law.

## How can you help?

**Lobby your local MP** to highlight the importance of continued collaboration on addressing health threats and improving public health. This is the most effective way of holding the UK Government to account. You can contact the RCN to receive one of our 'How to lobby' toolkits, and you can speak to your regional office for support. You can find details of who your local MP is here: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp>

## As the RCN we are:

Collaborating with other Royal Colleges as part of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change. Together, we are lobbying to retain current environmental standards and objectives that impact on health. We also want the UK to continue to work with the EU to ensure that there are future improvements in air quality and other public health standards, are adequately addressed across borders between countries, as they cannot be tackled domestically alone<sup>4</sup>.

Lobbying the UK Parliament to amend the EU Withdrawal Bill to ensure that there are sufficient checks and balances on what action future and successive UK Government can take to amend EU regulations on public health measures. This includes supporting an amendment to the Withdrawal Bill to ensure "a high level of health protection" in future policies and activities, as currently guaranteed in the EU treaties.

Working constructively with the UK Government and Parliament, the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Government and Parliament and stakeholders in Northern Ireland to shape and influence the development of domestic public health policies.

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<sup>3</sup> Scottish Parliament, *Leaving the EU – Implications for Health and Social Care in Scotland* (January 2018)

<sup>4</sup> UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, *Breath of Fresh Air – Addressing Air Pollution and Climate Change*, available here. September 2016.