

## **Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands**

EU Conference on the health of young people (Be Healthy, Be yourself)

Brussels, 9th July 2009

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this wonderful initiative. I am truly inspired about the intention of this conference to listen, learn and motivate.

As you said, Madam Commissioner, literacy influences our behaviour. Because in our digital world, our ability to understand and handle information is crucial to the way we function. I consider myself fairly literate, but I envy the ease with which many of you use digital skills. I certainly have a lot to learn! So our level of literacy – and numeracy actually – determines how we feel and how we interact within our working and living environments. No wonder then, that our level of literacy impacts on our health.

At the heart lies the uncomfortable truth of the shockingly high levels of functional illiteracy across Europe, both among adults and younger people: on average, 15% of adults lack the literacy and numeracy skills to fully participate in society. And 20% of our children lack the same basic skills. In the Netherlands alone, 1.5 million adults have low literacy levels – 1 million people are born and bred there; 500 000 people have come to the Netherlands later on in life. We must tackle this uncomfortable truth if we want to achieve our ambitions about a healthy and sustainable Europe.

The underlying question is, do we find the shocking figures acceptable? Do we see them as mere statistical data or do we realise that behind these numbers, there are people, young and old, who are vital for the future Europe? Do we fully realise the impact these numbers have on our health, our economies, and ultimately our democracies? *Literacy is a mindset*, said the Dutch philosopher Erasmus.

Both in the Netherlands and internationally, I speak to a lot of people of different ages who have or have had difficulties in reading and writing. What always stands out is that literacy feeds their self-esteem and gives them a sense of independence. They feel more empowered and yes, are healthier. Here's how a 23-year old Canadian woman describes it:

Shy...

*The me we all see*

*Isn't always the me*

*That I*

*Used to be.*

Hope...

*I became an expert*

*at hiding that me*

*Until opportunity knocked*

*And released me.*

Optimism...

*I opened the door*

*And found you,*

*The learner in me*

*Just waiting to be free.*

Knowledge...

*Today the me we all see*

*Is the me that I have longed to be.*

*A lean, mean learning machine.*

Freedom...

*I now believe that*

*I will succeed*

*And achieve my goals*

*Because I am a Somebody.*

*I am*

*Me*

And then there is Herman de Boorder, a wonderful man in his fifties, born and bred in the Netherlands. He's formerly illiterate. He's made it his mission to encourage children to take reading and writing seriously, based on his own life experiences. He recently said in speech at a school: "*Don't take the path I took of not learning to read and write. It's a dead end. I had no self-esteem and always felt ashamed. Make the right choices while you can.*"

Imagine the reaction: two hundred 16 year-olds, stunned in silence...

Herman's words underpin the words of the Commissioner: it's up to you to make your own future. More broadly, you are the future of our economies and our democratic societies across Europe. And if you follow this logic, it is also up to you to help build an inclusive society where *everyone* has a chance to live a healthy and enjoyable life.

Why am I talking to you about literacy when actually, you're joining an initiative about health, some of you may wonder. Good question. It is because the two are inextricably linked and because each of us has a role to play on both literacy and health, including you. What do I mean with this?

First: a plea to the policy-makers amongst you: investing in literacy is part of the solution of our health issues.

Secondly: we can only promote health among you and your peers if we address the challenges of health literacy.

First, the need to invest in literacy to also help solve health issues. This is about the notion of empowerment: feeling self-confident has extremely positive effects on our health as individuals, families and communities. And it even saves us money: in the Netherlands, illiteracy costs society 537 million Euro per year. We know that low literacy means poorer

health knowledge, poorer health status, higher mortality, more hospitalizations, higher health care costs.

Secondly, addressing health literacy:

Health literacy means the level at which we have the capacity to obtain, understand and process basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Thinking back a few years, I empathise with the challenges of making choices in your lives, moving from studies to work, from a family life to a more independent life for which you become more and more responsible. That's great, but it can also be daunting. And then imagine you lack the necessary skills to make these choices and fulfil demands such as filling out tax forms and understanding policies of a health insurer or the instructions of a medication...

We need to gain a lot more insight into the level of health literacy among young people, simply because we know very little about it – while we do know that across Europe, a quarter of all 15-year olds are low achievers in reading. So if we want to communicate better about health issues (or anything else for that matter), it is a precondition that illiteracy is tackled head-on.

So is illiteracy getting the attention it deserves? The answer lies with you, with us. Let's not forget how privileged we are. You may not have trouble reading and writing, as you came to this conference, read the information on the special webpage and joined the online discussions. Maybe you are even one of the authors of The European Youth Forum publication... You may not have been aware of the shocking reality of literacy issues across Europe. I fully understand. But now that you are, I hope that you'll join me in my plea that we need to consider the limitations of those with reading and writing difficulties in all we do – and all help break the taboo around illiteracy. We are making some progress in the Netherlands, with joint efforts of public and private players, including my own Reading & Writing Foundation. But it really is a question of `frapper, frapper toujours!`

We should also put the European situation into a wider international perspective. Today, we are still confronted with the staggering figure of 776 million illiterate adults worldwide and 75 million children who do not go to school and millions more young people leaving school without a level of literacy that allows them to adequately participate in society.

As UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, I support UNESCO's efforts in promoting literacy as a key for development. It is essential for the health and well-being of people everywhere. We are half way through the United Nations Literacy Decade - "literacy and health" currently has a special focus. This Decade gives a framework for increasing efforts, resources and collaboration worldwide and for more effective literacy work on the

ground. UNESCO's literacy programmes around the world help provide knowledge and skills for healthy lives and disease prevention and encourage and advocate for better collaboration between local, national and international health and education bodies.

I asked you to listen long enough – it's high time we learn from you! So just a few concluding thoughts: today's gravest health concerns cannot be adequately addressed unless literacy finds a central place in public health policies and strategies – be it about communicating health, education as a driver for a better health or partnerships in healthy environments. There is no silver bullet in eradicating illiteracy. We need to start by accepting the uncomfortable truth of illiteracy in Europe, gain insights into what it means in practice and then tackle it. We all have a role to play. And with the right mindset, we'll certainly succeed!

It is up to us all to see literacy the way Kofi Annan has described it: "as a road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential".

I wish you an inspiring and constructive conference and follow-up dialogue, based on listening, learning and motivating.

Thank you.