



Wachau Cultural Landscape



Lower Austria, Austria

General overview

Austria is a democratic republic in Central Europe and a federal state, comprising nine provinces. Lower Austria, the largest province, lies in the northeast of the country. It surrounds the capital – Vienna – and has a 414-km-long border with its neighbouring European Union (EU) Member States, Czechia and Slovakia. Along with a variety of landscape types and mixture of climate zones, Lower Austria has an eventful history and an extremely rich cultural heritage. St. Pölten, its capital, is one of the youngest provincial capitals in Europe.

Lower Austria's main economic sectors are tourism, industry, commerce, agriculture and forestry. Covering a geographical area of 19 179 km², the province has 573 municipalities with a total population of 1 684 287 (2000) (1). The gross

domestic product per capita is €34 900 (2017) and life expectancy at birth for males and females, respectively, is 79.4 and 83.8 years (2).

Due to Austria's federal structure and system of compulsory insurance, the country's health-care system is characterized by the interaction of numerous actors from the different legislative and administrative levels (federal-government, provincial, local-authority) and the self-administration sector (social insurance). The Federal Government is responsible for legislation related to and enforcement of the health-care system. The provinces are responsible for important areas related to health care, such as the operation of hospitals and the provision of social services (including nursing care and long-term care) (3).

The province of Lower Austria established the Health Agency of Lower Austria (NÖ Landesgesundheitsagentur) under public law to manage all 27 public hospitals and 50 nursing facilities in the region. The province's main

objectives cover healthy ageing, quality of life for all citizens, provision of the best medical and nursing care, and equal access to health-care facilities for everyone, regardless of age, income, place of residence, religion or descent (4).

Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): (i) moving towards Universal

Health Coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies.



Moving towards UHC

In Austria, health care is based on a social-insurance model founded on compulsory insurance, which covers 99.9% of the population and is financed mainly through social-insurance contributions. Access is regulated by a social-insurance law and based on the principle of solidarity and self-administration. Based primarily on occupation, people living in Austria are assigned to one health-insurance institution. A large range of health-care services is available to the population. With a few exceptions, there is no obligation to obtain the consent of the health-insurance institution before using the services of doctors contracted to social-health-insurance outpatient clinics, or those of general practitioners (GPs). The latter handle most health-care issues and are responsible for referrals to specialists, or for hospital treatment, where necessary. Comprehensive medical care is guaranteed throughout Austria (3).

The Health Agency of Lower Austria is responsible for the operation and management of the 27 hospitals and 50 nursing homes in Lower Austria. Currently, more than 3800 doctors and specialists, and a staff of over 26 000 people, ensure that every patient receives the best possible treatment (4).

Lower Austria's health system also includes a department for supply-chain management and the purchase of goods, and a legal department that deals with the regulation of laws related to economic and public procurement and the protection of medical data (4).

In 2017, within the framework of the then ongoing health reform, the legal basis for a new primary-health-care (PHC) system in Austria came into force, whereby a total of 75 new PHC units were created.



Promoting health and well-being

In Lower Austria, six PHC units are in operation in the form of a health initiative, which has provided a wide range of support measures, information materials, a blueprint of a care concept, regional care profiles, and a communication strategy. The region is focusing particularly on the establishment of primary-care centres that provide citizens with a low-threshold, comprehensive range of close-to-home medical

services during patient-oriented opening hours. In Lower Austria, 99% of the population live not more than 45 minutes from their local health-care centres (5).

Healthacross Healthcare Centre Gmünd (cross-border primary care)

Prepared and planned with the support of Interreg and built through funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the first European cross-border health-care centre was opened in Gmünd in 2021 (6). It is located directly on the border between Gmünd, Austria, and České Velenice, Czechia. In the Gmünd Healthcare Centre, it is possible for Austrian and Czech patients living in the border region to access a multiprofessional team of Austrian and Czech medical and therapeutic experts for outpatient treatment (7).

The establishment of this Centre represents a new highlight of cross-border cooperation in the European Region. A state treaty between Austria and Czechia regarding emergency services has already been put in place whereby the hospital in Gmünd is accessible to Czech residents (7).



Protecting against health emergencies

Lower Austria has a well-organized crisis-and-disaster-management system. This enables adequate response to natural disasters (including floods, storms and thunderstorms), events related to increasing traffic (rail accidents, air emergencies, shipping accidents, industrial accidents) and the failure of critical infrastructure (electricity, energy). Dangers that may arise from the transmission of diseases (biological hazards) are also taken very seriously. The Lower Austrian pandemic plan is regularly updated (8).

Preclinical emergency care

Austria has a nationwide network of ground-based emergency services (with and without the involvement of emergency doctors), air-rescue services, and patient-transport services. The organization of emergency services is the responsibility of the local authorities; the provinces are responsible for providing the necessary emergency equipment. Organizations providing emergency services, such as the Red Cross, are usually contracted to this end. Alongside professional staff, numerous voluntary employees are deployed to the emergency services and patient-transport services. The provincial emergency coordination centre assesses the level of care required and, where appropriate, sends an ambulance with paramedical staff and/or an emergency-physician vehicle. If necessary, other rescue services are alerted and first-aid instructions given over the telephone (8).

Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

Initiative relative to empowerment through digital health

In November 2019, a health-advice telephone hotline first introduced in Lower Austria as a pilot project, became the first point of contact throughout Austria on health issues and acute symptoms. This 24/7 hotline (1450) can be called free of charge for advice about any health concern. A trained, qualified nurse will determine the level of urgency and advise callers about what to do. This may, for example, be to consult their GP or nearest hospital emergency department. If the health problem is acute, they will immediately

alert the emergency services. The hotline provides quick guidance to every caller and leads them to the best available care (9).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotline was of the utmost importance: from the very start, 1450 was the number to call in case of symptoms of the virus. Guidance on testing and vaccination in Lower Austria is provided by the operator of the health-advice hotline (9).

Initiative specific to Lower Austria

Healthacross initiative

Lower Austria's geographic location requires cross-border cooperation due to its long border with Czechia and Slovakia and its close proximity to Hungary. The Healthacross initiative is part of the Health Agency of Lower Austria with the aim of strengthening and facilitating cross-border cooperation on health. Via Healthacross, Lower Austria is participating in four transnational networks and, since 2008, has conducted eight EU-cofunded projects on cross-border health care in the fields of in- and outpatient care, PHC, endometriosis, digital pathology and neonatal care. The projects are being carried out within the corresponding Interreg programmes to improve the health and quality of life of citizens living in border regions. They have one overarching goal, namely, the equal, close-to-home access of citizens to quality health care (7).

The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. cross-border health care
2. hospital care
3. nursing and care centres.

Main partners and collaborators

These are:

- the Health Agency of Lower Austria (NÖ Landesgesundheitsagentur) of the Federal Government of Lower Austria (Land Niederösterreich);
- the Austrian Health Insurance Fund (Österreichische Gesundheitskasse (ÖGK)) of the Federal Ministry for Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection (Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz);
- Notruf Niederösterreich (Notruf Nö) of the Health and Social Fund of Lower Austria (Der niederösterreichische Gesundheits- und Sozialfonds (NÖGUS)).

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