



13th Biennial Conference

From Vision to Action:

**Shaping the Future of
Primary Health Care**



**GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR HEALTH
AND ACTIVE AGEING**

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Minister for Health and Active Ageing, Hon. Jo Etienne Abela

In his address at the 13th Biennial Primary Health Care Conference, the Minister highlighted the rapid evolution of medicine and technology, stressing that Malta must continue advancing through innovation and sustainability. He emphasised that the future of healthcare lies in primary and preventive care, ensuring a sustainable system for future generations. Current investments include the refurbishment of the Rabat Health Centre and the introduction of point-of-care testing to enhance diagnostic accuracy. The Minister underscored the importance of recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals, making primary care more attractive through better working conditions and professional growth.

He praised initiatives such as the streaming project at Mosta Health Centre, which has significantly reduced patient waiting times, and the expansion of telemedicine, including the successful 1400 Helpline, which has optimised patient referrals across healthcare levels. The Minister also outlined ambitious screening initiatives, including the creation of a National Screening Centre at the former Boffa Hospital, dedicated to mammography, lung, prostate, and colon cancer detection, with plans to lower the screening age for colon cancer.



Looking forward, he announced plans for genetic screening services and increased focus on mental health integration within primary care. The Minister concluded by reaffirming his belief that primary healthcare is the foundation of a sustainable, patient-centred system—one that prioritises prevention, technology, and holistic well-being—thanking all professionals for their dedication and contributions to Malta's evolving healthcare landscape.

Ing Karl Farrugia, CEO



The CEO of Primary Health Care Malta opened the 13th Biennial Conference by reflecting on the organisation's achievements and outlining the launch of a new Culture-Building Programme, a key initiative aimed at creating a stronger, more connected, and values-driven workplace. The programme seeks to foster trust, inclusion, compassion, accountability, and shared leadership while enhancing staff well-being and collaboration –recognising that the quality of patient care depends on the people delivering it.

Using the Appreciative Inquiry approach, the initiative will involve staff at all levels through surveys and focus groups to explore what is working well and how challenges can be turned into opportunities. The CEO highlighted that cultural transformation takes time and begins with listening, assessment, and collective engagement.



Alongside this cultural journey, Primary Health Care is advancing significant infrastructural and digital projects, including the conversion of the ex-Boffa Hospital into the new Floriana Health Centre and the development of a Centre of Excellence for National Screening Programmes. Other innovations include publishing waiting times online and introducing a new ticketing system at Mosta Health Centre. These initiatives form part of a wider strategy to modernise PHC through technology, artificial intelligence, and skill enhancement. The CEO concluded by thanking all staff for their dedication, professionalism, and continued commitment to excellence in patient care.



Speakers

Mr Victor George Battistino

Mr. Battistino provided an update on the ongoing modernisation and upgrading works within Primary Health Care, as follows:

- Rabat Health Centre: Nearing completion.
- Mosta Health Centre: Phase 1 completed.
- Ex-Boffa Hospital: Undergoing full modernisation and upgrading; the site will accommodate both the Floriana Health Centre and the National Screening Services Centre.
- Cospicua Health Centre: Upgrading works in progress.
- Head Office: Planned relocation to the former Floriana Health Centre premises.
- Harper Lane: Facade restoration and improvement.



Dr Elayne Azzopardi

Dr Azzopardi focused on the use of telepractice in delivering Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) services in Malta and examined the perspectives of SLPs, service users, and other stakeholders. To date, there is limited research exploring the perspectives of Maltese Speech-Language pathologists (SLPs) and other stakeholders regarding the effectiveness and impact of telepractice. Dr Azzopardi's study addressed this gap by investigating experiences and perceived outcomes associated with telepractice delivery in Malta. Participants included SLPs, service users, and other relevant stakeholders who have engaged with telepractice services either currently or in the past.





Speakers

Dr Myra K. Tilney

Dr Tilney, explained how her qualitative study explores the use of digital transformation to enhance early identification of Familial Hypercholesterolaemia (FH) through the co-design of a pre-consultation tool for cascade testing. Semi-structured interviews with FH patients and healthcare professionals informed a user-centred design, identifying communication preferences, privacy concerns, and digital opportunities. The “My Health” platform emerged as a potential enabler. Thematic analysis produced user personas and use cases addressing patient, family, and clinician needs. The proposed tool was considered feasible, acceptable, and appropriate for implementation. Findings highlighted how digital innovation can strengthen family-based FH detection and support more efficient clinical pathways.



Dr Claire Saliba Thorne

Dr Saliba Thorne presented the findings regarding how ulcer prevention relies on offloading high-pressure areas through visual observation and clinical experience. The aim of her study was to compare the outcome of incorporating in-shoe pressure mapping as an adjunct to standard diabetic foot management versus relying on the standard diabetic foot management on its own. In her conclusion, Dr Saliba Thorne highlighted the need for more objective clinical decision making in the management of the diabetic foot. A significant reduction in cases of ulceration in the experimental group ensued as a result of regular monitoring with an in-shoe pressure mapping device.





Speakers

Mr Jurgen Bonett

Mr Bonett explained how in 2024, Malta's Primary Health Care launched a strategic programme to strengthen Tissue Viability services in response to increasing chronic wound cases. Initiatives included specialised nurse training, outreach supervision, the introduction of the Electronic Patient Record, and the opening of dedicated Wound Care and Vascular Outpatient Clinics.

A 2025 national audit across nine Health Centres highlighted strengths in hand hygiene, dressing changes and wound infection management while identifying areas for development in infection control practices, patient privacy and dignity, compression therapy use and education, documentation and holistic care. Looking ahead, PHC aims to enhance multidisciplinary collaboration through a Tissue Viability Working Group, expand digital tools and data-driven systems, and invest in continuous staff development, infrastructure, and prevention to deliver consistent, high-quality wound care across all centres.



Panel 1

The 1st Panel focused on advancing clinical training, technology, and preventive care within Malta's healthcare system. Ms Marcon Grima outlined the launch of an accredited nursing training programme, approved by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority, to ensure nurses acquire advanced competencies beyond basic induction. Modules will cover wound management, venipuncture, documentation, and job shadowing. A dedicated plaster technician will also be trained abroad to strengthen in-house expertise. The initiative aims to raise skill levels and shift perceptions of nursing within Primary Health Care.

Dr Sacha Reiff discussed innovations in screening, emphasising artificial intelligence for breast and lung cancer imaging and the use of home test kits to improve participation in colorectal and cervical cancer screening. Ms Sylvia Camilleri highlighted that Malta now complies with EU guidelines by offering colorectal cancer screening to all citizens aged 50 to 74. This milestone was achieved through increased colonoscopy capacity and targeted awareness campaigns. She also noted that plans are underway to lower the screening age further, in response to the rising incidence of colorectal cancer among younger adults.

Dr Justine Farrugia Preca highlighted the expansion of the national vaccination programme to include pneumococcal vaccines for the elderly and HPV vaccines for males, noting strong uptake among younger groups.

Mr Lawrence Bonavia discussed the challenges in nursing, including workforce shortages, digital adaptation, and documentation improvements through the updated Electronic Patient Record system. He stressed the importance of lifelong learning, data-driven decisions, and embracing artificial intelligence to optimise service delivery.

The panel concluded by reaffirming the value of prevention, innovation, and continuous professional development as essential pillars for sustaining high-quality, patient-centred care within Malta's Primary Health Care services.



Panel 2

The 2nd Panel focused on innovation, efficiency, and quality improvement in Malta's primary care system. Dr. Patrick Galea presented the Clinical Streaming Model piloted at Mosta Health Centre, designed to balance clinical safety and efficiency amid increasing patient demand. The system triages patients into three categories—red (urgent), amber (semi-urgent), and green (routine). This approach significantly reduced GP waiting times from 4–6 hours to an average of 40 minutes, while ensuring critical cases are seen within 10 minutes.

Dr. Marius Caruana discussed the introduction of Immediate Life Support (ILS) training tailored for primary care professionals. Conducted at Qormi Health Centre, the training uses realistic scenarios to enhance preparedness for cardiac arrest or emergency situations. Over 95 doctors and nurses have completed the course, which improves response times, teamwork, and clinical confidence.

Dr. Akanji highlighted the need for sustainability in appointment-based clinics by balancing access, efficiency, and equity. She suggested flexible scheduling, stronger administrative support, and digital tools to minimise missed appointments while maintaining care quality.

Dr. Dorothy Zammit outlined PHC's achievement of ISO 9001 and ISO 7101 certifications—the latter being specific to healthcare management. This makes PHC Malta the **first in Europe** to receive ISO 7101, reflecting high standards in leadership, governance, patient safety, and integrated care.

Dr. Gunther Abela concluded by emphasising generalism, continuity, and comprehensive care as the pillars of PHC's five-year vision. Through clinical streaming, digital integration via Electronic Patient Records (EPR), and collaboration with secondary care and academic partners, PHC aims to deliver safer, more coordinated, and patient-centred services. The discussion underscored PHC's ongoing commitment to innovation, quality, and staff well-being in delivering accessible and sustainable healthcare for all.



Panel 3

The 3rd Panel explored the importance of emotional intelligence, patient-centred care, and interdisciplinary collaboration across allied health professions. Speakers emphasised that while artificial intelligence supports healthcare delivery, human connection, empathy, and understanding patients' lived experiences remain at the heart of effective care.

Ms Roberta Galea highlighted the role of emotional intelligence in building trust and compassion, ensuring practitioners listen actively and manage both their emotions and those of service users. Integrating the patient voice through feedback, surveys, and patient stories was seen as key to continuous improvement.



Mr Rosario Mizzi described the client-centred approach within Speech-Language Pathology, built on three pillars: accessibility of services, personalised intervention plans, and empowerment of patients and families. Empowerment helps shift the mindset from "fix me" to "supporting you to support yourself," encouraging long-term self-management.

Ms Vanessa Bezzina shared a project introducing keyword signing in childcare settings, empowering educators and parents to reinforce therapy in daily contexts, thus creating a more inclusive communication environment.

Dr Anabelle Mizzi explained that in podiatry, patient-centred care means tailoring treatment based on individual goals, comorbidities, and lifestyle while maintaining close collaboration with hospital specialists.

Ms Jacqueline Sciberras discussed the shift from the traditional biomedical model to a holistic biopsychosocial approach that considers patient goals, comfort, and daily realities to improve adherence and outcomes.

The panel concluded that leadership and emotional intelligence are crucial for supporting a motivated workforce. Leaders must foster professional development, cultural competence, and staff well-being while combining patient feedback and data to shape future services.

Panel 4



The last panel highlighted how Gozo's Victoria Health Centre transformed its vision into action by delivering modern, patient-centred care through innovation, accessibility, and community integration. Dr Bryen Gatt described how the centre evolved from a small, limited facility into a multi-storey, state-of-the-art complex offering over 18 clinical services. These include acute and appointment-based GP clinics, wound management, anticoagulant and diabetes care, ECG and podiatry services, and a dedicated sexual health clinic. Evening clinics were introduced to accommodate working patients, ensuring care remains convenient and accessible.

Community clinics across Gozo—such as those in Xewkija, Qala, and Għarb—were modernised to offer extended hours and specialised services, including ophthalmic screening, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, and smoking cessation. This decentralised model ensures patients can access high-quality care closer to home.

Mr Ronald Barbara explained that nurses play a crucial role in community-based care through well-being assessments, motivational interviewing, and identifying social determinants of health, ensuring an equitable and holistic approach. Clinics also act as social hubs, fostering community connection and emotional support.

Dr Sonia Abela discussed the rapid growth of telemedicine, initially accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which now offers 24/7 remote GP consultations, reducing hospital visits and improving accessibility. Supported by a robust IT framework, telemedicine integrates with patient records and offers real-time and video consultations.

Ms Samantha Zerafa highlighted the work of the PHC Client Support Centre, handling 2,600–3,000 daily calls related to appointments, medical queries, and referrals, underscoring the scale of public reliance on PHC's digital front line.

Parliamentary Secretary, Hon. Malcolm Paul Agius Galea

Dr Malcolm Paul Agius Galea, Parliamentary Secretary for Active Ageing emphasised in his address that primary care is the cornerstone of any health system, describing it as the “front door” through which every patient should enter the healthcare network. General practitioners (GPs) are portrayed as the embodiment of trust and continuity—acting as family doctors, confidants, and first responders to patients’ physical, psychological, and social needs.

Acknowledging the efforts of nurses, allied health professionals, and the wider healthcare team, Dr Agius Galea stressed that PHC must not be overlooked, as it provides accessible, equitable, and holistic care to all segments of society.

Dr Agius Galea concluded his speech by praising Malta’s healthcare professionals for their dedication and resilience, affirming that sustained investment in PHC is crucial for the future of the nation’s health system. He encouraged continued collaboration and commitment to patient-centred values, stating that “the front door counts most” — symbolising PHC as the vital entry point to effective and compassionate healthcare.



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