

Healthcare cooperation: Patients to benefit from new Commission proposals

The European Commission is today proposing a number of initiatives which aim to encourage co-operation among Member States to raise standards of accessible, high quality healthcare which is at the same time financially sustainable. Healthcare is regularly identified as one of the most important issues for Europe's citizens¹. While responsibility for healthcare rests with Member States, there are a number of common challenges, such as the ageing society, increased needs and demands from citizens and rapid technological change. The Commission's proposals are aimed at individuals. They include efforts to promote practical co-operation on the access to healthcare in another Member State. They should also empower patients by giving them better information on how to obtain treatment across borders and by making the most of technology to improve the quality, availability and effectiveness of care. They also benefit the healthcare profession, by proposing the development of centres of excellence, and mapping out how to harness new technologies. Finally the Commission addresses co-operation at government level, by proposing a framework for Member States relating to reform and modernisation of healthcare, long-term care and social protection.

"EU law gives patients the right to go for treatment in other Member States. But exercising that right can prove difficult. A central aim of our proposal is to explain patients' rights more clearly and ensure they have the information they need to make use of those rights. My final goal is to achieve a European Charter of patients' rights to which everyone can refer." said David Byrne, the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection. "Our proposed system of cooperation will help healthcare systems to work together for the benefit of patients. To me it is simple common sense. Where there are empty hospital beds in one country and waiting lists in another then cooperation can benefit everyone. By working together the Member States will be able to improve healthcare and shorten waiting times."

Stavros Dimas, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, said: "Health systems play a vital role in combating the risk of disease and poverty and ensuring social cohesion and employment. Bold reforms of funding and provision are vital to cope with demographic pressures, technological change and rising costs and to ensure continued quality, access and financial sustainability. Our aim is to support Member States in ensuring quality care provision for all Europe's citizens."

"e-Health will open the door to more easily accessible and better quality health care, said Erkki Liikanen, European Commissioner for Enterprise and the Information Society. "It is not about technology, but about patients. It can reduce errors, speed up treatment and offer important cost savings.

¹ Identified as fifth 'most important issue facing our country' in Eurobarometers 59 and 60 (2003).

We have to invest in new solutions, boost skills and re-organise health services so that patients and health professionals get the most from new technology and services. Everyone from the patient to pharmacists and physicians can benefit if we move ahead with our forthcoming e-Health roadmap.”

The package proposed by the Commission comprises three elements:

1) A policy document on patient mobility and healthcare, including:

- better provision of information to patients on how to obtain treatment in other Member States (even if EU law gives patients the right to seek treatment in other Member States (see IP/01/995), exercising these rights is not always straightforward. Accessing healthcare in another Member State depends on having information about the quality, availability and appropriateness of the treatments available there. It also means knowing how to get your national healthcare system or health insurer to pay for the treatment);
- making it easier for national healthcare providers to use spare capacity (such as empty hospital beds) in other Member States;
- networks of health experts and centres of excellence across the EU as well as coordinating assessment of new health technologies;
- systematic exchange of best practice.

A high level group on Health Services and Medical Care bringing together Member State representatives and the Commission will be created to drive this process of cooperation. The proposal on patient mobility and healthcare developments presented by the Commission today come in response to the recommendations which completed the reflection process launched in February 2003 (see [IP/03/1678](#)).

2) Establishing the “open method of co-ordination” to support national efforts to reform and develop healthcare, long-term care and social protection, focussing on the need for high quality, accessible care that is financially sustainable.

3) An action plan on e-Health to be adopted in the coming days, addressing the crucial role of new technologies and new ways of delivering health care in improving access to, quality and effectiveness of care. The action-plan takes a twin track approach: making the most of new information and communication technologies in the health sector and better integrating a range of e-Health policies and activities. In practice, this means making people and governments more aware of the benefits and opportunities of e-Health; making a reality of interoperable health care information systems, on-line and digital patient records; new services such as teleconsultation and e-prescribing. eHealth will be the subject of a major conference under the Irish Presidency early in May.

For more information:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_overview/co_operation/mobility/patient_mobility_en.htm

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-prot/healthcare/healthcare_en.htm.

http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/2005/all_about/ehealth/index_en.htm

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