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Cross-Border Healthcare

EU Drives For Common, Improved and Meaningful Standards

Charter on Patient Rights

On March 15, 2007, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on cross-border healthcare, insisting on the EU's obligation to guarantee absolute protection of health and reinforce patients' rights. Alongside, Parliament also noted the need to establish a legal framework for cross-border healthcare arrangements. This was in acknowledgement of three factors: the diversity of healthcare systems in different Member States, European Court judgements on the free movement of patients; as well as conformity with the overarching principles of solidarity, equity and universality. MEPs also underscored the need for common principles and core guidelines in healthcare in order to ensure patient safety. They noted that increased collaboration between the Member States has resulted in improving information about cross-border mobility for patients. Such processes, however, need to be accompanied by a common charter of patients' rights in the future EU framework, and should underpin the system of responding to complaints by patients.

The issue of patients' rights and entitlements is considered to be fundamental in relation to cross-border healthcare, given that the mobility of patients throughout Europe raises an important question: Can EU citizens be assured of receiving high-quality of care and of having their rights respected if they need medical treatment beyond their national frontiers? In such a perspective, it has increasingly become politically unacceptable that patient rights sometimes differ substantially from one Member State to another.

New Standards will Align Best Practices

The Parliament also urged the creation of a network of European Centres of Reference as well as incorporation of a "mechanism for data collection and exchange of information" between healthcare providers and national authorities.

The legal framework would ensure that EU patients are fully aware and informed about treatments available in other Member States and reimbursed by their national health insurance systems. It will not only make access to treatment quicker and less costly, but also boost healthcare standards by progressively aligning them with best available practices.

A Challenge and an Opportunity

In Commissioner Markos Kyprianou's view, this is less an issue about a Commission initiative on a new concept than "how we in the Commission, together with Parliament and the Member States, can make this concept, this reality, work for the benefit of patients without being to the detriment of the national healthcare systems, their viability and their operation."

This, he underlined "is a big challenge for us but I think it is a big opportunity as well, and we can make it work for the benefit of citizens."

Cooperation on E-Health

Member States of the European Union and the European Economic Area adopted a declaration on April 19, 2007 on their commitment to cooperate on cross-border e-Health services across Europe, within the cross-border healthcare framework.

e-Health applications such as electronic prescriptions, electronic patient files and health cards are implemented with the aim of delivering safer, more efficient and better quality of care. Dr Klaus Theo Schröder, State Secretary at Germany's Federal Ministry of Health explained that the aim was "to give patients access to their medical records and patient summaries from everywhere within the EU. This not only serves (in providing) ... continuity of care but also affords safety in an emergency".

Indeed, one key aspect of the Declaration at Berlin's e-Health Conference 2007 was the need to ensure that development of electronic health services is not limited to national frontiers but incorporate future facets of cross-border cooperation, and do this on an upfront and proactive basis.

Checklist for Meaningful Cross-Border E-Health

In light of the above factors, it is clear that EU-wide crossborder electronic health services will be meaningful only if they conform to the following criteria:

- î The nuts-and-bolts of national e-Health infrastructures continue to be established
- î EU Member States work collectively on common standards
- î European standardization, in turn, opens up new market opportunities
- î e-Health implementation provides greater synergy with research and education
- î The e-Health industry and other stakeholders (including healthcare IT managers) are closely involved in the process

Franz de Bruine, Directorate-General of the Information Society and Media, noted that “the Commission welcomes the Declaration on European co-operation in the field of Europe-wide electronic health services.

The European Commission is supporting the first steps towards their concrete implementation by means of Large Scale Pilots. The co-operation on e-Health services will help build a European health information space for the benefit of Europe’s citizens.” (CC)

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