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News Europe

Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health

Last December, the European Commission adopted a green paper on the EU workforce for health. This marks the beginning of a consultation period which aims to identify common responses to the many challenges facing the health workforce in Europe. A high quality health workforce is crucial for successful health systems. The health workforce plays an important role in the EU economy, accounting for about 10% of all jobs. In addition, 70% of EU healthcare budgets are allocated to salaries and employment related issues.

The aim of the green paper is to increase the visibility of these issues, to generate a clearer picture of the extent to which local and/or national health managers face the same challenges and to engage stakeholders in the debate so as to help those responsible across Europe to address these problems effectively.

The results of the consultation will feed in to what the EU can do to support member states in tackling these challenges.

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_systems/docs/workforce_gp_en.pdf

First EU Health Prize for Journalists

The European Commission has launched the first EU health prize for journalists as part of the Europe for Patients campaign. The prize has a dual purpose: the recognition and promotion of high quality health journalism across Europe. It is hoped that the prize will stimulate and contribute to the debate on EU health issues, specifically those initiatives related to the Europe for Patients campaign.

The Europe for Patients campaign was launched in September 2008 by EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou to provide a single entry-point to the often complex world of EU healthcare policies and actions. The Commissioner has emphasised the responsibility journalists have in communicating EU health policies to European citizens, especially concerning the Europe for Patients campaign which focuses on issues that affect us all such as cross border healthcare, patient safety and organ donation. She hopes that this prize will have the desired effect and stimulate debate on a local, national and international level.

Articles published in print or on-line publications between 2 July 2008, when the first Europe for Patients initiative was adopted, and the closing date of 15 June 2009 will be considered. Journalists are invited to submit their articles using the on-line entry form on the Europe for Patients website.

http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/europe_for_patients/index_en.htm

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European Commission's Communication and Recommendation on Patient Safety

Each year in the EU between 8% and 12% of patients admitted to hospitals suffer harm from the healthcare they receive, including from healthcare associated infections. Much of that harm is preventable. Therefore, last December the European Commission adopted a communication and a proposal for a Council recommendation with specific actions that member states can take, either individually, collectively or with the Commission, to improve the safety of patients.

The Commission held a public consultation earlier last year, the results of which have informed the current proposal. This follows an earlier consultation on the specific threat to patient safety posed by healthcare associated infections. Working groups representing member states and key stakeholder groups, including health professionals and patients, have also contributed to discussions.

The Commission has already taken individual initiatives in the past, such as addressing certain aspects of patient safety in community legislation, or fostering research and collaboration on patient safety by community co-funded projects. With this communication and the accompanying proposal for a Council recommendation, the Commission aims to put in place an integrated approach to patient safety.

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_systems/patient_safety_en.htm

EU Crossborder Health Directive

During the month of December, EU health ministers met in Brussels in order to discuss the crossborder health directive. They focused their discussion on the first three chapters of the draft directive. While some progress has been made since the tabling of the draft directive, some health ministers have shown restraint and have proven divided on its support. They reaffirmed their fears about a loss of national sovereignty over healthcare, while others expressed a wide range of views on the scope and implementation of the directive. They reached general consensus on improving legal recourse for crossborder patients, as well as expressing their preference for a provision allowing "informed choices" and enhanced cooperation between countries.

The ministers at the Employment, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will discuss this revised draft, after the Parliament has issued its opinion, in June of this year.

Work Programme of the Czech Presidency

(1 January – 30 June 2009) As of 1 January the Czech Republic has taken over the Presidency of the EU and has announced their "work-plan" for the upcoming months.

In the sphere of employment, the Czech Republic has announced that "worker mobility within the EU" is one of their top priorities. They believe "restrictions on the free movement of workers constitute a major barrier to the development of the internal market, hampering full use of the real potential of the EU member states and the EU as a whole", thus promoting the "full liberalisation of the movement of workers within the EU and the simplification and increase of professional and geographic mobility of workers in the labour market." Along the same lines, the Presidency believes that a "practical implementation of the Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs and of the general principles of flexicurity" are needed to improve conditions within the EU in general.

Regarding the health sector, the Presidency has announced its support for the current EU initiatives in crossborder healthcare, quality and safety of organ donations and transplantations, rare diseases, as well as patient safety and the control of nosocomial infections, with a focus on anti microbial resistance. It also articulated great interest in the development of "the definition of financial sustainability and its objectives, and on the analysis of the resources available for healthcare funding", in an effort to be better prepared for the May 2009 high level conference. This conference is the perfect forum in which "to share experience and exchange information and best practices concerning healthcare systems and their financial sustainability."

The Presidency has also expressed a great interest in e-health and telemedicine. It has asserted its disposition to increase the quality of healthcare through the aid of telemedicine and strengthening the interoperability of information systems in the healthcare sector. It has also proclaimed that "in February 2009, the topic of e-health will be discussed at a ministerial conference organised in cooperation with the Commission," with the aim of improving cooperation between EU member states in this sphere.

EHCI Rates the Netherlands as "Best Healthcare System in Europe"

In November, the 2008 edition of the annual Euro Health Consumer Index came out with its facts and figures for the year. This publication, which comprises 34 indicators of quality, ranked the Dutch healthcare system as "the best" in Europe.

The overall ranking was divided into six categories: e-health, patient rights, patient information, waiting time for treatment, waiting time for pharmaceuticals, and the speed at which new drugs are deployed.

The report went on to single out Denmark, Ireland, Czech Republic and Hungary for praise due to their noteworthy improvement ratings. Not all in the report was positive however. It also gave a damning warning that standards may be falling, particularly in terms of patient waiting times in many member states.

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