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### The European Parliament

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European institutions - This is the second part in a series which covers the structure and operations of the EU institutions. In the first of the series (Winter 2006), Helicia Herman introduced the European Commission (EC) and details of the EC Directorate-Generals relevant to healthcare IT professionals were presented. This part of the series describes the composition, functioning and main role of the European Parliament. Parliamentary Committees which are responsible for developing the Parliament's votes on legislation and which may be of interest to healthcare IT professionals are also listed together with the contact details and chair persons and finally the process of lobbying is explained. The final two parts in this series, for Summer and Autumn 2006, will cover the Council of the European Union and the European Court of Justice.

#### Overview

The European Parliament (EP) represents the interests of the people of the European Union Member States. The President directs all activities of the Parliament and acts as its representative. Since 1979, its members (MEPs) have been directly elected every five years by the people they represent. MEPs hence represent their constituents at a European level. The present Parliament, elected in June 2004, has 732 members from all 25 EU countries. However, if the European Union's Constitutional Treaty comes into force in the future, its provisions will cap the size of the European Parliament. Rather than working in national divisions, the members sit in seven Europe-wide political groups; distribution of members across the four largest of these are shown in table.

1. The distribution of members across countries is shown in table 2.

**Table 1. MEP distribution across the four major European political groups**

Political groups	Abbreviation	Number seats
European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats	EPP-ED	268
Socialist Group Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	PES	201
Green/European Free Alliance	ALDE Green/EFA	89
		42

Table 1. MEP distribution across the four major European political groups

**Table 2. Distribution of MEPs by country (n = 732)**

Poland	13
Italy	78
Greece	9
Austria	19
Belgium	24
Luxembourg	6
Cyprus	6
Malta	6
Czech Republic	24
Netherlands	27
Denmark	14
Finland	54
Estonia	6
Portugal	24
France	24
Slovakia	14
France	78
Slovenia	7
Germany	99
Spain	54
Sweden	24
Sweden	19
Hungary	24
UK	78

Table 2. Distribution of MEPs by country (n = 732)

The EP has three places of work: Brussels (Belgium), Luxembourg and Strasbourg (France). Whilst Luxembourg is the home of the administrative offices, the General Secretariat, meetings of the whole Parliament, known as plenary sessions, take place in Strasbourg for one week each month. Two-day and Committee meetings are held in Brussels.

Similar to the US Congress, Parliament does most of its work in specialist committees. Parliament has 20 committees, each covering a particular area of EU activity (for committees of interest to intensive care, please see below). During the committee meetings, MEPs prepare for the plenary session. At the plenary sessions, Parliament examines proposed legislation and votes on amendments before coming to a decision on the text as a whole.

## **The EP's Main Role**

The Parliament's main task is to debate and vote on European legislation, just as a national Parliament votes on national legislation.

EU legislation is normally adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. Both Parliament and Council may hold two readings of draft legislation and if, by then, they have not agreed on the same text, a conciliation committee composed of 15 representatives from each side negotiates a compromise which must then be approved by Parliament and Council. This procedure ensures that European legislation is acceptable both to the representatives of national governments (on the Council) and to MEPs whom the electorate has directly chosen to represent them.

In some fields (for example agriculture, economic policy, visas and immigration), the Council alone legislates, but it has to consult with Parliament. In addition, Parliament's assent is required for certain important decisions, such as allowing new countries to join the EU.

Parliament also provides impetus for new legislation by examining the Commission's annual work programme, considering what new laws would be appropriate and asking the Commission to put forward proposals.

## **How Does the Legislative Process Work?**

A Member of the European Parliament, a rapporteur working in one of the parliamentary committees, draws up a report on a proposal for a legislative text presented by the European Commission. The parliamentary committee votes on this report and may amend it. When the text has been revised and adopted in plenary, Parliament has approved and adopted the position outlined in the legislation. This process is repeated one or more times, depending on the type of procedure and whether or not agreement is reached with the Council through the co-decision procedure.

## **The Co-Decision Procedure**

Co-decision gives the same weight to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union over a wide range of areas; two-thirds of European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. The co-decision procedure was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty on the European Union in 1992, and extended and made more effective by the Amsterdam Treaty in 1999.

## **In Whatway Does the EP Add Value to the EU?**

A significant contribution of the EP is in the diffusion of potential national conflicts. Whereas the Council may appear to be concluding decisions following debates between those representing national interests, the Parliament operates in a different way. The fact that the Parliament organises itself in political groups rather than national delegations means that disagreements on most concrete subjects are between political viewpoints or sector interests, rather than between nations.

The European Parliament is part of what makes the EU radically different from a traditional intergovernmental organisation. Indeed, imagine the EU without the Parliament: it would be a system totally dominated by bureaucrats and diplomats, loosely supervised by ministers flying periodically into Brussels. The existence of a body of full-time representatives at the heart of decision-making in Brussels, asking questions, knocking on doors, shining the spotlight on dark corners, and dialoguing with constituents back home, makes the EU system more open, transparent and democratic than would otherwise be the case. MEPs are drawn from governing parties and opposition parties and represent not just capital cities, but the regions in their full diversity. In short: "The Parliament brings pluralism into play and brings added value to the scrutiny of EU legislation" (Richard Corbett, MEP, 2005).

## **Parliamentary Committees**

The European Parliament has 20 parliamentary committees, each consisting of between 25 and 78 MEPs. These committees are presided by a chair and have a bureau and secretariat. The political make-up of the committees reflects that of the plenary assembly. The committees meet once or twice a month in Brussels and debates are held in public. The committees draw up, amend and adopt legislative proposals and own-initiative reports.

Moreover, any resident of the European Union, whether or not a citizen of a Member State, may, individually or in association with others, submit a petition to the European Parliament on a subject which falls within the European Union's fields of activity, and which affects them directly. Any company, organisation or association with its headquarters in the European Union may also exercise this right of petition.

Finally and also of interest regarding individuals' rights, Article 255 of the Treaty establishing the European Community states that citizens and residents of the European Union have a right of access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents.

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