



The Frequency of Error in Healthcare Has Failed to Decline in 20 Years

- **Main reason for scepticism toward the national healthcare systems**
- **Fundamental organisational work is more important than developing first-rate medicine**
- **Patient safety is the focus of the “European Health Forum Gastein 2008”**

The inadequacy or lack of progress in the prevention of errors in medical treatment in hospitals and medical practices has become one of the most important quality problems of the national healthcare systems. “Patient safety is the foundation for a high-quality healthcare system,” the European Commission noted to its member states, attesting to their significant deficits in this regard. Experts say there is enormous potential for improvement in healthcare in the systematic fight against mistakes. For this reason “patient safety” is also a key theme at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) this year. In the 11th edition of the most important European health policy event there are several forums and workshops devoted to opportunities for tackling this urgent problem from various sides.

“Decision-makers simply don’t take the dimension of this problem seriously enough,” EHFG President Günther Leiner says. “Policy, science, doctors and, last but not least, public health officials are focused far too much on headline-making achievements in top medicine instead of doing their medical “homework.” The potentials for improvement are not located primarily in the prevention of classic “malpractice,” rather in the areas of hygiene, acceleration of procedures in acute cases, certainty of diagnosis, reduction of waiting times and similar things. “As wonderful as it is when a new transplant technology for another organ saves a human life, we can hardly overlook the fact that with far less investment and medical competence ten other patients could be helped from becoming the victims of preventable and often extremely banal mistakes,” Leiner says.

Numerous measures for the targeted improvement of patient safety are possible even without added financial costs. A simple change of processes and procedures or ensuring effective communication between all players are often enough to achieve remarkable improvements. “First and foremost we don’t need any more money here, rather another attitude toward the problem instead,” Leiner explains.

Leiner’s criticism is scientifically well-substantiated by diverse studies. Several of them show that ten percent of all hospital patients are affected by some form of medical mistake. Since the 1980’s there has basically been no sign of improvement. The most extensive US study in this area to date, “To Err is Human” (1999), estimates 44,000 to 98,000 fatalities as a result of mistakes in medical treatment – more than the victims of traffic accidents, AIDS or breast cancer. According to statements by the European Commission, treatment errors are estimated in an average of ten percent of hospital admissions. This year’s EHFG will tackle this issue and present the last few years’ results and developments in the area of medical treatment errors.



Obviously the patients are often more aware of the problem than those in charge. According to Eurobarometer, 78 percent of all EU citizens consider the lack of patient safety to be a serious problem in their respective national healthcare system. Experts expect significant progress from the new EU directive on patient rights. Increasing options for taking advantage of healthcare service abroad are also heightening pressure for a commensurate improvement of quality standards in the member states.

“The primary reason for the fully inadequate progress in the area of patient safety is that no one seems to really feel responsible for it,” Leiner explains. “This is because lasting achievement is only actually possible if doctors, hospital managers, scientists and health policymakers approach the problem together.” Consequently, the European Health Forum, which brings all the groups to the table with its interdisciplinary approach, plays a key role in the further development and particularly in the implementation of effective strategies for improving patient safety in the EU.

Events on the issue of patient safety at the EHFG 2008

Quality and safety (Forum 6)

One of the central forums of the EHFG 2008 provides an extensive explanation of the current situation and new initiatives in the quality control and improvement of the healthcare industry in the EU countries. EU-level strategies may result in higher quality standards.

In numerous other events patient safety issues play an important role:

Innovations in coordinated healthcare (Forum 5)

Possibilities for improving quality through the increased use of innovative information and communication technology solutions and the resulting improvement in the coordination of treatment processes.

Improvement of patient safety by the example of thrombosis prophylaxis (workshop)

Deep vein thrombosis leads to a half million fatalities in European hospitals every year and causes lasting damage in many other patients. With the appropriate organisation and adherence to quality standards a substantial number of cases can be prevented.

Antibiotic-resistant germs (EU Presidency Workshop)

The violation of safety standards fosters the development of antibiotic-resistant germs which in turn represent a considerable risk factor for hospital patients – presentation of measures to battle the problem.

EU draft directive on patient rights in cross-border healthcare (workshop)

Patient safety and patient rights are central areas in the development of a body of legislation for obtaining healthcare service in other EU countries (cross-border healthcare). This directive aims at supporting patients in availing cross-border healthcare services by guaranteeing safety and quality and promoting better cooperation between the national healthcare systems.

Further information:

EHFG Press Office, c/o MB Dialog, Thomas Brey
Tel.: +43 1 917 51 18-25; E-Mail: ehfg@mbdialog.at