

Patient Mobility Shifts to Focus of Health Policy Discussion in the EU

- **Presentation of the directive at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) event.**
- **Varied reactions to the draft directive on cross-border healthcare services in the EU.**
- **Since its establishment in 1998 the EHFG has played a significant role in the discussion on patient mobility within the EU.**
- **The EHFG will also provide a platform in 2008 for the general exchange of opinions between EU institutions, member states and interest groups.**

The draft directive on cross-border healthcare services a few days ago was the centre of focus of an information and discussion-related event of the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) and SME Union of the EPP (Small and Medium Entrepreneurs Union of the European People's Party) held Tuesday under the direction of EHFG President Günther Leiner and SME Global President and MEP Paul Rübzig at the European Parliament in Brussels. Despite the onset of the summer lull, there are already a large number of reactions to this long-awaited draft, which underscores the significance of the issue.

At the EHFG event the Director General of the DG for Health and Consumers Robert Madelin presented the draft. It had already been awaited for some time, but the incorporation of numerous amendments had led to delays. The current draft is considered a watered-down version of the original plans with which three essential targets are to be reached:

- Support for patients in exercising their right to cross-border healthcare
- Ensured safety and quality of cross-border healthcare
- Better cooperation of national healthcare systems in order to take advantage of synergies.

On behalf of the participants in the discussion, Irene Wittmann-Stahl, Health Attaché to Germany's permanent representation to the European Union, said that Germany welcomes the fact that there is now a concrete proposal which forms the basis for the necessary political discussion of the issue. The necessity of a European regulation for cross-border healthcare services was also underscored by Wittmann-Stahl, who nevertheless maintained that the member states must continue to have central instruments of control in order to deal with the consequences of patient mobility, particularly in the area of stationary and highly specialized medical care.

Miroslav Mikolasik, MEP (Slovakia) and member of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, sees in the draft an important stimulus for the improvement of the quality of healthcare systems in the member states as well as for investments in technical equipment and the infrastructure of healthcare facilities. However, Mikolasik fears that the current draft may be trimmed in the decision-making process to such an extent that the anticipated benefits for patients may only be achieved to a marginal degree.

On behalf of the European Health Forum Gastein, Secretary General Matthias Schuppe said it is high time the issue of patient mobility is regulated in practical terms and with the citizens of the EU in mind. Increasing professional and private mobility urgently requires rights that are clearly defined and which can be easily exercised in order to take advantage of healthcare

services abroad in the EU. “For years patient mobility has been one of the most important issues at the EHFG, and from there several important initiatives concerning content emerged, that can now be found in the draft directive.” Günther Leiner, president of the EHFT, pointed to the fundamental principles: “Regardless of the political arguments brought forward by diverse interest groups, what is critical to success is that the well-being of patients remain the focus and that people from lower income levels are also able to take advantage of healthcare services abroad, particularly when better treatment is provided in national contact points rather than in one’s country of origin.”

In spite of the urgency of the issue, Leiner expects a long period of preparation until implementation of the planned directive: “For this the EHFG will continue to provide a broad-based platform and we are certain that the opportunity existing only at the EHFG of gathering together every interest group – European institutions, member states, leading representatives of healthcare officials, healthcare facilities, business, science and NGOs – for an exchange of opinions will critically enrich and advance the discussion.”

The event was a complete success with 120 participants including several members of the European Parliament. Robert Madelin, head of the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Affairs, said he highly welcomes the presence of the EHFG in Brussels. This is all the more satisfying as the event is also the inauguration of EHFG activities in Brussels. Further events on current issues in European health policy are planned.

Further Information:

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