



EHFG – HEALTH CARE FOR ELDERLY NOT "ZERO SUM" RESOURCE COMPETITION

Improving health care for older people can be a win-win situation for society, but is often viewed instead as a “zero-sum” game in which resources for the older generation can only be delivered at the cost of the younger. The rights and needs of older patients was a topic discussed by experts on the final day of the European Health Forum in Bad Hofgastein.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2011 – Legal proclamations that older people have the same rights as everyone else to health care are not enough. To discourage discrimination, society in general needs to better appreciate that resources devoted to older people need not be at the expense of younger generations. Participants at the European Health Forum in Bad Hofgastein today generally agreed that better health care for the ageing can be a win-win situation.

Rebecca Taylor, Senior Researcher at the International Longevity Centre-UK (ILC-UK), told participants in a discussion on the rights and needs of older patients why the "zero sum" approach to health care provision is short-sighted. It centers on “competition for shrinking resources among different age groups, such as older workers blocking jobs for younger people, and policy solutions that focus on cost control such as increasing co-payments for healthcare, without making any other changes.” The "life course" approach, on the other hand, “sees each generation as providing value to society and views challenges to health and social care systems as needing fundamental change that would improve health promotion for older people to enable them to stay healthy, active and independent for longer.”

Examples of a life course approach to health and social care include England’s health check programme for signs of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease in people aged 40-74. Life course vaccination programmes and telecare tools to monitor care home residents with dementia are other effective programmes. As is the Japanese social care insurance system’s extension of health promotion services to older people who are still independent.

The messages: an ageing population “is a serious challenge for health and social care systems, but not a fatal one! People can, and do, contribute to society across the life course, albeit in different ways. To meet the challenges of demographic change, health and social care systems have to innovate and do things differently, not just cut costs, though the two can co-exist.”

Director Paul Timmers, DG INFSO, European Commission, also focused on the "lifecourse" perspective. "This takes into account historical developments over the lifetime, social relationships such as with family members, and the variations in patterns of life events and life transitions of the person" which could fruitfully inform innovation and research. Particularly in the field of ageing, informed innovation would require listening carefully to older people themselves, their family, their informal and formal carers. Making this possible

requires a partnership approach with exchange of ideas and insights between all involved, an approach that is increasingly being pursued through a number of projects at European level.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it attracted more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries for discussions on the latest developments in health care policy.

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