



EHFG President Leiner: Saving on health workers dangerous and expensive

The impact of the economic crisis on health and health systems is the focus of discussions at the 15th European Health Forum Gastein, which opened today in Bad Hofgastein. Saving on health service workers, and thus on offering appropriate care to people who were sick or needed to be looked after, was not merely inhuman, but entirely underestimated the additional health costs generated by such an approach, according to EHFG President Prof Günther Leiner.

Bad Hofgastein, 3 October 2012 - The impact of the economic crisis on European health care systems and on people's health, but also the potential opportunities for radical systemic reforms offered by the pressure of empty coffers - these are just some of the topical issues on the agenda of the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG), which opened today in Bad Hofgastein.

“The debate about increasingly scarce resources and the effect of economic constraints on healthcare spending have inevitably been a *leitmotif* at the EHFG for many years,” said EHFG President Prof Dr Günther Leiner. “Now the human consequences of austerity policies are becoming ever more visible.”

It was unacceptable and intolerable that massive budgetary restraints were being imposed which cut essential health services to the point of placing sick people in real danger, said the EHFG President. “On the other hand, despite the pressure to save money, resources are actually being poured into unnecessary structures and pointless treatments. If we see the crisis as offering an opportunity, it is maybe this: that we at last ensure that the available, limited, resources are really used to provide optimal care for people who need it, and to make structural reforms which stop money flowing into the wrong channels.”

The fact that dramatic austerity measures in certain countries were cutting into the bone of health care had now been amply demonstrated, he said. The latest OECD Health Data report for 2012 showed that in 2010, after years of rising health spending in a number of European countries, there had been massive cuts. For example, these had amounted to -7.6% in Ireland, -7.3% in Estonia and -6.5% in Greece.

Saving on health care workers

“Very often these savings are being made at the expense of health care workers, which in practice means at the expense of patient care,” said Prof Leiner. “One example is Bulgaria, where salaries of nurses were reduced by 10 to 25% in 2010 - no wonder that every year 1,200 nursing staff emigrate. In Romania, a 25% reduction in hospital wages resulted in an exodus of around 2,500 doctors who are badly needed to care for patients.” But even in countries where savings were not so drastic, health workers were under enormous strain, said Prof Leiner, “not least because of the current trend to economize in everything, including the health sector.”

Dramatic consequences could not be ruled out, he said. These would initially affect health workers themselves. According to the Institute for Doctors' Health (Villingen), 35% of Austrian and German clinicians regretted their career choice. A high level of occupational



dissatisfaction is considered a major risk factor for burn-out. In Slovakia, a study among healthcare professionals in inpatient care institutions showed a burn-out rate of 33%.

Not enough staff - more infections

“All this has fatal consequences for everyday life in hospitals and nursing facilities,” said the EHFG President. “If doctors and nurses are under pressure to work excessively long hours, and clinics are under-staffed, that has consequences for the quality of patient care.”

A recent study^[1] made this particularly clear, he said. The more patients a nurse had to look after, the more vulnerable the patients were to contracting a urinary tract infection or a surgical wound becoming infected in the hospital. And the higher the proportion of nurses with burnout, the higher the rate of infection.

“There is certainly room for savings in the health system - we are far from exploiting all the structural potential,” said President Leiner. “But making cuts in the health professions is completely wrong-headed. By overloading the staff you make them ill. And stressed, overworked staff make patients more ill, instead of healthier. That is inhuman, and makes things even more expensive for society.”

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the European Union. In this its 15th year, the EHFG attracts more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries to discuss major topics on the future of the European health care system from 3 to 6 October 2012.

Please find photos of the European Health Forum Gastein using this link: <http://www.ehfg.org/940.html>.

EHFG Press Office

Dr Birgit Kofler

B&K Kommunikationsberatung GmbH

Ph. during the Congress: +43 6432 3393 239

Mobile: +43 676 636 89 30

Phone Vienna office: +43 1 319 43 78

E-Mail: press@ehfg.org

^[1] Cimiotti et al, 2012, American Journal of Infection Control