## EU single health market strengthens the mobility of patients and of knowledge

17th European Health Forum Gastein, 1-3 October 2014

*Poor availability and unintelligibility of information are obstacles on the road to a Europe-wide optimisation of health literacy for European citizens. Networking, transparency and comparability on the European health market, for their part, provide fresh impetus for building up health literacy according to experts at the European Health Forum Gastein.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 3 September 2014** – A European single health market and the cross-border directives in the European health care system must be viewed as a chance for strengthening health literacy in the European population. That was the tenor of a discussion at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). Jan Geissler, cancer survivor and Director of the European Patients’ Academy on Therapeutic Innovation (EUPATI): “The single health market not only increases the mobility of patients, but also the mobility of knowledge. Increased competition for patients means expertise will become more mobile.”

The availability of more mobile expertise and the forging of European networks to implement complex clinical studies and innovative treatment methods should benefit patients and their health literacy. Geissler: “Patients deserve the best treatment available.  Especially in rare diseases, medical expertise is often not available in the region of residence.” He added it was not always sufficiently accessible for patients. A European single health care market would increase the mobility of expertise and make it more available. Geissler went on to say that innovative therapies depend on comprehensive clinical studies, which, in turn, require the structural conditions of certain centers and regions. That is why mobility is a key factor for the availability of the best possible health care.

**Reducing language barriers**

Geissler noted that language barriers are frequently a factual obstacle to accessing optimum health care services, referring not only to people from different language regions understanding each other but also to the language chasms that existed in communication between experts and non-experts. “To improve health literacy, information needs to be provided in the language and at the level that patients understand.  Quite often, information is not made available in the right language, in words the patient understands. Patient organisations have an essential role in providing information to patients, pitched at the right level.  And for those seeking health services across borders, assistance not only through contact points but also support though local patient organisations might be essential.”

**Increasing transparency about inequalities**

Health literacy in a cross-border Europe-wide dimension likewise offers the hope that inequalities in building up health literacy can be eliminated between individual regions but also for certain social groups. Geissler: “To reduce inequalities, these need to be more transparent.  We need more transparency on inequalities - and availability of treatment and care - so quality of service can be compared by patients.  To decrease health inequalities, patient organisations should be strengthened both financially and structurally, and they should be involved across the delivery of health care services and cross-border implementation.  And the anachronistic and paternalistic rules on the EU and national levels of keeping medical information away from patients should be abandoned.” Geissler said these rules were out of place in these efforts to promote European health literacy, and that they seemed even more anachronistic in the Social Media era.

Health literacy refers to literacy on everyday knowledge, action and decision-making to promote health. A lack of health literacy has a negative impact on a person’s health while also having negative consequences for the health care system and the entire society, for instance, given the mounting costs for medical services.

“Electing Health – The Europe We Want” is the motto for this year’s EHFG. Around 600 participants from more than 50 countries are attending the most important health policy conference in the EU to exchange view on key issues affecting European health systems. The future direction of European health policy is the key topic on the conference agenda.

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