

Press briefing with Mr.David Byrne,

EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection
Friday, 29 September 2000, 8.30 to 9.30

Possibilities of modern communication have revolutionised developments in health care. However, problems have remained the same. The discussion of approximately 500 participants at the 3rd European Health Forum Gastein on the topic "Information and Communication in Health" focussed on financing, quality and ethical matters.

Health online

Health online is an Action Plan of the European Union aiming at introducing health telematics infrastructure for primary and secondary health care providers by 2002. The priority catalogue contains securing comprehensive information in eHealth, the adoption of quality criteria and certificates, connections between national and international health networks as well as checking the legal basis of eHealth until the end of 2001. The latter should clarify the influence of existing laws on the practice of eHealth, i.e. the reliability of online information, data security, international contracting, advertising for and sale of pharmaceutical products, and the certification of medical treatment. The member states, the Commissioners for Health and Consumer Protection, Enterprise, Single Market, and Information Society will be carrying out this project together with the private sector. Until the end of 2002, the infrastructure for the use of eHealth should be implemented by the Member States.

Whereas the EU tries to enforce equal access to modern information technologies for all citizens through the programme eEurope, the reality differs substantially according to the Eurobarometer poll results of May 2000 yet. Less than 50% of European physicians are currently taking advantage of the vast offer of medical databases on the Internet as well as the possibilities of communicating with colleagues from all over the world, says Dr Günther Leiner, President of the EHFG, at the joint press conference with the EU Commissioner David Byrne at the conclusion of this year's EHFG.

With less than 40% of panel physicians being equipped with computers, Austria, the host country of the conference, is undersold only by Portugal, France and Greece as tail-light with 20%. With reference to the law regulating quality of treatment, they should be forced to modernise the technical equipment of their offices, demands Dr Leiner.

In France, this process has started recently. Medical doctors are obliged to send their invoices via computers. The positive side-effect is a push in modernisation. France has been rated the country with the best health system by the latest WHO World Health Report.

Who is the Specialist: The doctor or the patient?

While physicians have to catch up in most European countries, the number of 'Internet patients' is growing continuously. 68,5% of medical doctors are confronted with patients who have already searched for information relating to their diseases on the net, states a study of the Health on the Net Foundation (HON).

After SEX, HEALTH is the most searched topic in the WWW. Information found is reaching from diagnosis to treatment options for children's diseases and the virtual hospital. Although an

estimated 100,000 health-related Websites provide information of all sorts, the quality of this information is highly questionable. Studies prove that 70 to 80% of health information on the Internet is wrong, incomplete or outdated. The solution approach currently followed and also discussed at the EHFG, aims at self-regulation. A label for quality information will be developed in order to protect patients from dilettantism on the Internet.

Quality of Information in the Internet

The Internet makes information available for anyone who has access to the Web. Access to information can well mean 'patient empowerment' since they enable patients to make informed decisions and take over more responsibility for their own health. The quality of informed decisions, however, depends on the quality of information available.

An ethical consensus is needed

The quantity and availability of health data through telemedicine, such as chip card systems, and Internet make a new form of ethical principles in health care necessary. Such 'info-ethics' need to meet the following criteria:

- Protection of medical data;
- Secrecy;
- Agreement to the use of data;
- Safe data transmission;
- Transparency,
- Joint decision-making.

From an economic point of view, the step forward towards the information age will pay off: up to 20% of health care costs could be saved through the use of information technologies, state EHFG experts. Costs savings would come from:

- Efficient data management;
- Development of decentralised health care: telemedicine makes high-quality services available even in remote areas. This does not only save costs, but also closer at the patient.
- Avoiding unnecessary doubling of services, e.g. X-rays, since data is available quickly over large distances;
- home surveillance and care systems save travel time and costs for patients and health care professionals.