

HOW ARE AND WILL DEVELOPMENTS IN HEALTH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION CHANGE THE WORLD OF HEALTH CARE AND PUBLIC HEALTH?

The stakeholders presented their thoughts on health topics in today's plenary session:

John Bowis (Member of the EU Parliament) speaks on the importance of communication in the health sector; it is crucial for the relationships of all participants: for the doctor and the patient, between medical professionals, from patient to patient and all of them with media and political actors. Communication is necessary to learn about the other's needs and to provide individual help.

Concerning the European Union and its policy Bowis feels the need of citizen empowerment, especially in prevention, in order to save the costs of treatment in the case of illness. Apart from that, reality always has to be considered, cynically enough, problems of financing are only solved, if a "reasonable" number of people have died through a disease.

New Technologies provide loads of information, the question is, whether this enormous flow of information improves health. Basically, extension of knowledge is appreciated, the danger of unreliable sources however raises the risk of wrong diagnosis or self-diagnosing patient's. Face-to-face communication therefore can never be substituted by information technology.

Peter Baeckström, President of EHMA also refers to the chances and risks of the new media concerning the doctor-patient relationship. "Doctors still regard their patients as talking guinea-pigs", but times are changing and hierarchical structures will revert and put the patient into the centre of interest. New technologies enable the patient to be informed and critical. The danger of new technologies is, that they might create new inequities: those patient's who have access to the Internet are advantaged.

Another speaker reported on the relationship between doctor and patient: Albert van der Zeijden (International Alliance of Patient's Organisation) reminds the audience of three long-lasting values of medicine: the patient is a pitiful person, that needs protection, secondly the doctor knows it all and finally, the disease is at the centre of health care and not the patient and his problems. A change of these values requires patient-oriented health care and implies that prevention and support have to be intensified. The self-righteous attitude of doctors has to be overcome and new technologies have to be integrated in the daily lives of all citizens in order to avoid "technological out-casts".

Prof. Dr. Christoph Fuchs (Rapporteur EU Economic and Social Committee) stated a movement from disease-based topics toward a new integrative approach within the European Union; new strategies demand new targets and the central question is, for what the scarce means are provided. Exact targets make efficient use of the resources possible. Four phases are necessary to define targets: investigation of medical requirement, a ranking of the collected data, which will need public discussion, before realization takes place; afterwards, evaluation is a must. Target-finding has to include all persons concerned (doctors, politicians, patients, citizens) and result from a bottom-up discussion. Once again, Mr Fuchs emphasizes the importance of successful communication.

The regions are challenged by the new technologies and the resulting changes in society, Eduard Rius I Pey, the Catalanian Health Minister, reported. Time and space are less important, enormous amounts of data can be administrated and networked, these are the advantages of the new technologies, the safety of the data and its regulation should be controlled by a supranational organisation.

The last speaker, Prof. Dr. Rolf Krebs (President of the International Federation of Pharmaceuticals Manufacturers Associations) considers the usefulness of new research results for diagnosis and treatment. These will help doctors and patients and are a challenge to the pharmaceutical industry. Nevertheless, he argues, that inadequate information could result in ethical and economic harm, if the patient takes the wrong medication. eCommerce could have advantages, but only in a regulated form. The pharmaceutical industry would participate, if the governments enact suitable legislation. The goal is always the usefulness for the patient, that could be increased through an improved dialogue between industry, research and patients.

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