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**Welsh visions of a new health policy**

*The path to a new National Health Service based on broad public participation*

**Plenary session I, Part B**

Jane Hutt, Minister for Health of Wales and Member of the New Welsh Assembly, illustrated at the European Health Forum Gastein the ambitious efforts of the new Welsh Assembly to improve health in Wales on a broad public and political basis with the objective to create a “socially inclusive Wales”.

**A new era –genuinely Welsh health policy**

Having recognised that strategies for improving health have far too long ignored a variety of social and environmental factors influencing the state of health in a society, the new Welsh Assembly started in 1999 to tackle this problem with the strategic plan “Better Wales”. (Following local referendums on government’s proposals for devolution, a National Assembly for Wales and a Scottish

Parliament were set up and took on their full powers of secondary legislation in 1999).

Jane Hutt, however considering the improvement of health in Wales as one of her specific goals, highlighted that such strategies can be regarded just as one part of the equation, new tools like health impact assessment form the other. In her opinion health impact assessment is the “key” for a better health in Wales, for just by learning from experience and by understanding the mechanisms of interaction between policy sectors, we will not only be able to raise more awareness and commitment for health issues in other policy sectors, but also to improve health effectively.

As Jane Hutt pointed out, the Assembly has to figure as a major example in the process of creating a modern and for every citizen accessible National Health Service and consequently has put health and well-being on the Assembly’s agenda as everyone’s responsibility.

### **The communities and citizens as subjects of Welsh health policy**

In February 2001 the Assembly published the plan “Improving Health in Wales” with the explicit goal to create a “health service for all”. Following this plan, which can be seen as taken directly from WHO textbooks, Jane Hutt stressed, “The existing structures and habits must change, but the potential profits will be enormous”. The Welsh Ministry for Health and the Welsh Assembly want the National Health Service to be seen as owned by the citizens of Wales. It has to place its strategies on citizen-centred policies and has to seek the public and especially the communities as key partners for the development of the health service. The local government, NGOs (e.g. patient organisations) and the local citizens have to be the actors of a local cross-cutting health policy and have to be involved in the development and formulation process of health policy programs.

The new National Health Service described by Jane Hutt will look at all aspects of community life in order to improve health standards. To put it in a nutshell

and to use Jane Hutt's words, "we need a National Health Service that reflects the local need".

The fulfilment of the plan's objectives, as Jane Hutt stressed, will depend on the long run on refined mechanisms of measuring the outcome of policy programs, in order to ensure the continuing improvement of the health service, and will depend on the growing accountability of the actions of the National Health Service. To tackle this particular "democratic" dimension of the development process, the structure of the National Health Service will be made simpler and, for example, 22 health boards established at the local level, including elected members of the local governments, of NGOs and of the public, to ensure that the local needs will be taken into account.

This major political initiative of Wales is accompanied by a consecutive raise in funding, which by the end of 2004 will be increased by 37 percent.

### **A self-critical National Health Service for a challenging future**

Jane Hutt illustrated a new Wales that is characterized by an opening-up of the policy-making process, which substitutes elite policy-making and enhances the people's voice instead. She highlighted that responsibility for the development of the National Health Service means to keep constantly asking oneself "Are we doing enough? Do we listen to our people?" and to make others aware of what investments in health can do for other policy areas.

Jane Hutt, Welsh Minister of Health, admitted in the end, "We have a challenging agenda, but we are planning to see it through".