

6. European Health Forum Gastein "Health & Wealth"

Media information
3rd October 2003



Many pills, long life? Research and Development as top priority of politics

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"Research and development should be the top priority for the state", Jeff Sturchio, vice president of the giant Pharmaceutical company Merck said at the 6th European Health Forum Gastein, "Those who are supporting the development of new medicaments, have a considerable influence on the future of Europe's Health-care-systems." Apart from having a positive impact on competitiveness and economic growth, investments lead to better access to adequate therapies and treatments that are adjusted to the individual patient. Struchio sees a big problem not just in the development but also in the distribution of medication. "There are many excellent products, but they are not available all over Europe. In every country, taxation, regulations on reimbursement and measures to keep costs down are different. Sometimes new products do not even get on the market or are not affordable for the patients."

In some countries, the long-term-therapy of Patients that suffer from arthritis were denied a long-term therapy in order not to cause a budget deficit in the health system.

Saving with nature

Gastein's healing-tunnel in Böckstein proves, that it is not always necessary to have long-term therapy with medication: A study by the University of Maastricht proves that the therapy in the healing-tunnel has a positive cost-benefit-balance in the case of Morbus Bechterew, a kind of rheumatism, that causes a stiff spine. "In the same manner we could help 80 or 90 per cent of patients with arthritis and rheumatics", says Prof. Dr. Albrecht Falkenbach, medical director of Gastein's healing-tunnel.

The Maastricht study demonstrated, that six months after the cure, the use of "Non Steroid Antirheumatica" (NSAR) of the Healing-tunnel-patients was 21 per cent lower than that of the control-group.

A three-week therapy in the healing-tunnel costs about 1800 Euro, whereas a treatment with medication would at least be 15.000 Euro a year if made with the newly licensed TNFalpha blockers.

Many pills, long life

Less new substances on the market mean a lower life span- at least according to a long-term-research of Frank R. Lichtenberg, that has been ordered by NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research, England) and the results of which have recently been published. The research was done from 1982 to 2001 and analyzed the effects of new products on the lifespan: All together the lifespan increased for 2 years on an average between 1986 and 2000 in the 52 examined countries.

According to Lichtenberg, 40 per cent of this increase can be credited to new pharmaceutical products. Lichtenberg comes to the result, that the average lifespan is increased by nearly three weeks due to new drugs – within the next 14 years that would mean 0.8 years or nearly 10 month. Therefore Lichtenberg rejects the opinion of health-economist that a long lifespan is only attributed to better education and information, as well as to a better nutrition and last but not least to a higher income. A higher availability of drugs does not have any influence on the lifespan in the developed countries.

New products as the heart of economic progress

Lichtenberg quotes an American study that had focussed on the following therapies: Heart-attack, breast-cancer, depression, underweight birth (“early birth”) and cataract. Considerable progress was made in these therapies, if new substances were tested. Sum up: Research gives life and life-quality. If it is still a concern to politics, that the population is healthy up to a higher age, has a longer working-ability (later retirement age) and less and shorter absences for illness, the pharmaceutical industry’s position must not be weakened in Lichtenstein’s opinion. Research in this field must not be treated as the step-child of the health-care-system.

Small market, worse service

Since even in the European common market health is mainly a responsibility of the individual countries, the quick launch of new drugs for everybody is blocked. A study from July 2003 by the National Bureau of Economic Research shows that the larger the market and the higher the per-capita-income in a country is, the more and quicker will the pharmaceutical products be available. A research team analyzed, where and how fast 85 new pharmaceutical products, which had been licensed between 1994 and 1998, were positioned in 25 markets: In the USA a majority of the products (73) could be found in the shelves with a delay of about four months, followed by Germany (66 products, nine month) and Great Britain (64 products, seven month). Very far down in the European average was the economically weaker Portugal (26 products, 22 month), which was even bettered by countries with a lower per-capita-income like Poland and the Czech Republic (both 31 products, 21 months).

The European Health Forum is taking place from Oct 1st, 2003 to Oct 4th 2003 in Gastein. Under the title “Health and Wealth” 550 participants from 43 nations are discussing the developments in the health-care sector.

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