

6. European Health Forum Gastein "Health & Wealth"

Press conference

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EU Eastern Enlargement: Chances and risks for health systems

Juozas Olekas, Lithuanian Minister of Health
Dorjan Marusic, Slovenian Secretary of State for
Health

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International Forum Gastein
Congress Press Center
Bad Gastein
Tel: +43-6434 30021; Fax: 30012
press@ehfg.org
www.ehfg.org

Media Representative
Dr. Carmen Kiefer
carmen.kiefer@utanet.at
Tel +43 676/ 344 9971

Everyone wants to go away The exodus of staff in the health sector worries EU accession countries

"Braindrain", the drain of knowledge in the health field into foreign countries worries EU accession countries. After the EU accession many highly qualified physicians, nurses and therapists want to emigrate to the old European countries because on the one hand they are urgently needed there and on the other hand they expect better working conditions. These issues were discussed by the Lithuanian Minister of Health Juozas Olekas and the Slovenian Secretary of State for Health Dorjan Marusic at the European Health Forum in Bad Gastein.

Emigration with return guarantee

"Most of our physicians will emigrate to neighbouring Scandinavia, England and Germany", said Minister of Health Juozas Olekas from Lithuania, "and in the US live many Lithuanians, too. Many of my fellow students studied there." But in his opinion the "brain drain" will be weaker than expected because the people will return after some time. Further, the Lithuanian government will try to establish new institutions complying with western standards for returning physicians. "But nevertheless more doctors will emigrate than return", said Olekas.

Labour shortage in Slovenia

For Slovenia – one of the smallest accession countries – there are no such problems, said Dorjan Marusic, Secretary of Health of Slovenia. “Only 50 Slovenians work abroad as physicians”. A problem for the country is the labour shortage in the health sector: “In the next seven years we will need 700 physicians and 2000 nurses”, said Marusic. The Slovenians want to compensate for the lack of nursing staff by neighbouring Croatia, “furthermore the access to a working place in the health sector is relatively easy”, said Marusic. There would be daily rather than permanent immigration.

Protection of the generic industry

There are also discussions on the pharmaceutical industry in the accession countries which produce mainly generics: According to Marusic Slovenia has made a list of medicines the prices of which are fixed by insurances; Parallel medicines should promote the compliance with other EU countries.

Lithuania has fixed a period of transition of six years, said Olekas. But he expects difficulties with patents only in the first year.

Both Lithuania and Poland want to protect their pharmaceutical industry in the competition with big companies.

Co-operation with Austria and Italy

To improve the health system after the EU accession the Slovenians have set certain goals: The refund and medical administration should be revised and the general health situation of the Slovenians improved. Together with Italy and Austria there shall be new projects in the health sector. “The emphasis is on Italy; we want to share medical laboratory devices with the Italians”, said Secretary of State for Health Marusic.

Profiting from EU experience

“In Lithuania we want to profit from the EU experience in the health sector after the accession”, said Minister of Health Olekas, “There will be problems for us in the free movement of services and concerning more expensive medical treatments in the EU.” Furthermore the Lithuanians have too much nursery staff and hospital beds; therefore the co-operation in the system shall be improved, explained Olekas. Before the EU accession there were already many positive changes in the Lithuanian health sector: “We have a lower infant mortality than the US.” In the future there shall be more outpatients and more investments in the prevention against diseases, accidents and soft drugs.

The European Health Forum is taking place from 1st to 4th October 2003 in Gastein. 550 participants from 43 nations are discussing developments in the health sector under the general theme “Health & Wealth”.

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