

## **Costs and Benefits: Targets for Responsible Health policy**

- **Elimination of social inequalities in healthcare quality**
- **Rare diseases as a challenge for cost-oriented healthcare systems**
- **Reasonable assessment of personal and social responsibility**

The key theme of the 11<sup>th</sup> European Health Forum Gastein in October 2008 is “Values in Health – from Vision to Reality.” Numerous individual events discuss the challenges resulting from the stipulation and practical implementation of ethical standards in modern health policy. Even setting the necessary priorities unavoidably confronts decision-makers and society with ethical problems such as the question of how much society wants to spend on healthcare as a whole and in which measures and research projects will investments be made or not.

“Whether at the national or European level, those following the current health policy discussions could easily conclude that they revolve solely around the economic challenge of optimising costs and benefits,” EHFG President Günther Leiner criticises. “We have to remind ourselves that health policy is also a matter of other non-economic goals such as quality of life, patient orientation, quality and safety in healthcare and ultimately a longer life. That attention is to be given to economic constraints and efficiency-related considerations is obvious, but they must not be the most important decision-making criteria.”

As generally accepted as these principles are likely to be, they are hardly obvious when put into practice. The “Rare Diseases” forum highlights one particularly serious set of problems between economic and ethical considerations. “As a rule, from an economic perspective the development of treatment methods for rare diseases has hardly been of interest for industry. But is it acceptable that little is done for these patient groups because it simply isn’t worth it?” Leiner asks. “Policies are needed for the rapid development of solutions without losing sight of the investments in the treatment of common diseases.”

Welcome tendencies in modern healthcare policies raise ethical questions as well. For example, the increased emphasis on patients’ personal responsibility in practice leads to better educated and wealthier social groups benefiting substantially more from public healthcare services than other groups in the population. “There is a field of tension between social and personal responsibility and “it’s your own fault” is certainly not an adequate answer to social status-related differences in peoples’ health-related behaviour.”

### **Further information:**

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