



EHFG 2012: Hospitals facing far-reaching change over the next five years

Five trends will cause a complete revamping of hospitals in the near future: concentration on the patient as a whole instead of on individual organs, a multidisciplinary approach, continuous care and system integration, and the search for interventions that are highly effective despite involving minimal resources. Experts at the European Health Forum Gastein argued that this change is needed because health care systems are reaching their limits in terms of financing in the current paradigm.

Bad Hofgastein, 5 October 2012 – Health care systems in many countries around the world are facing a sea change. Austerity budgets following the economic crisis have boosted the pressure that already existed because of technology innovations, the increase in chronic conditions and the aging of population. Dr Eric de Roodenbeke, Director General of the International Hospital Federation (IHF), addressed these problems at European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG): “Many changes will be especially evident in hospitals over the next five years.”

After somewhat of a time delay, the recession has now finally reached the hospitals, too. The consequences may appear completely different depending on the type of health care facility or on the country but certain common denominators are evident. Dr de Roodenbeke: “The shift that is needed is not happening fast enough because the players were not prepared for this fast pace of change in a highly complex system.”

Five options for revamping the system

Several options for action have clearly emerged in the meantime, however, with respect to what the hospitals can do in this difficult situation. Most important of all is patient-centered care. Dr de Roodenbeke: “Until now we have concentrated on treating individual organs or diseases. An approach focusing on the condition of the patient as a whole is more effective and more affordable in the long run.

Similarly, the emphasis in the future will also be on greater continuity in health care, on many areas of specialization collaborating together, on the integration of different systems and on services involving maximum effect and minimal costs. IHF Director General de Roodenbeke: “The hospitals that make progress with such measures will fare the best in the long run whereas those whose areas of specialization continue to work on parallel tracks without cooperating will suffer from the changes.”

Technology, policymaking and strengthening of patients needed

Dr de Roodenbeke stressed that innovations in technology could become an especially important instrument of change: “The introduction of an effective documentation of patient data redefines the relationship between caregivers and patients and the paths within the health system. That requires far-reaching change beginning in actual practice on the front lines and extending to the hospitals with specialized medical services.”

The success of this change will depend on the hospitals themselves but also on policymakers. “At country level, policymakers must clearly answer the questions of what task the health system has and whom it should serve. In addition, an optimum environment has to be created for the change.” What hospitals need in particular is autonomy and greater responsibility for



their decision-makers. However, resistance and obstacles are inevitable, especially when existing power-structures crumble, and health professionals are fearing losing their autonomy and decision making power.

Dr de Roodenbeke called for further steps to be taken to empower patients so that the problem of chronic diseases can be dealt with more effectively. In most countries there is no alternative to further increases in contributions directly through individual payments or indirectly through higher contributions to social services and taxes. “In a context of downturn the solidarity models are under important tensions. Each stakeholder has to do its best to be more efficient for the social contract to be maintained. We may reflect on this while celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of Jean Jacques Rousseau in Geneva.”

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the European Union. In this its 15th year, the EHFG attracts more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries to discuss major topics on the future of the European health care system from 3 to 6 October 2012.

Please find photos of the European Health Forum Gastein using this link: <http://www.ehfg.org/940.html>.

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