

Towards equity of access to quality healthcare in the EU: A comprehensive approach to tackle a complex issue

Access at the heart of quality in health systems performance

The right to health, meaning “equality of opportunity for people to enjoy the highest attainable level of health”¹, is recognized as a human right of every human being. Moreover, improving access to healthcare is a precondition for better health outcomes and quality performance of health systems. Despite wide consensus among EU Member States on the need to ensure equity in access to healthcare, access remains unequal in Europe. Little progress has been made in identifying concrete measures to address gaps due to a range of issues, from the conceptual challenge of defining and measuring “access,” to the lack of collaboration among states in gathering and sharing relevant data as well as in sharing and promulgating good practices. All of this is exacerbated by the European financial crisis and the austerity measures put in place by governments.

Although a number of international organisations, including the OECD and the European Commission, are trying to measure and share best practices on access to healthcare using a range of indicators, several challenges remain. There is potential room for improvement in looking for concrete measures that could be monitored over the coming years to address gaps to access to quality healthcare. Main challenges range from the conceptual challenge of defining and measuring “access,” to the lack of collaboration among states in gathering and sharing relevant data as well as in sharing and promulgating good practices. Moreover, a holistic approach is necessary to define access to healthcare. Access to healthcare encompasses different elements such as coverage, access to quality services including prevention, affordable medicines, waiting times and workforce availability.

Undeniably, access is a complex concept to define and measure; moreover, differences in interpretation of the existing evidence hinder the success of policies to address this matter decisively. In addition, the divergence in patients’ ability to access healthcare between and within countries poses another set of difficult questions. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that one of the main components of access to healthcare of patients, especially those with chronic diseases, is affordable medicines that ease the burden of the disease. Although we believe that there is an urgent need to adequately address this major challenge in its complexity, this should be done in a way that recognizes that access to medicines is one piece of ensuring access to healthcare, which also implicates the availability and affordability of quality services for all segments of the population.

A multi-stakeholder approach to a multi-dimensional issue

Against this background, in 2015 PACT undertook the ambitious step to develop a definition that captures the essence of access in a comprehensive manner. The core elements of access, or “the 5As concept”, suggests that true access to healthcare is defined by services which are:

¹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12 of the Covenant)*, 11 August 2000, E/C.12/2000/4, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4538838d0.html> [accessed 18 May 2016]

1. **Available** (present)
2. **Adequate** (sufficient and continuous in terms of supply)
3. **Accessible** (available for utilization in physical terms)
4. **Affordable** (avoiding causing financial hardship to those who use them)
5. **Appropriate** (relevant to the needs and cultural setting of those who use them)

This definition recognises access as a multi-faceted notion constituted by a number of essential preconditions that must be put in place. The 5As' concept, developed through a multi-stakeholder mapping exercise examining access across the EU, can serve as a stepping stone for future efforts to improve access across the EU.

The conclusions of the 5As mapping exercise are unambiguous: deficiencies in access to healthcare among and within the EU Member States exist. Importantly, although there is evidence of good practices across the EU, all countries continue to face challenges in showing progress in all areas assessed. The exercise underscores the need for the systematic collection of comparable country-level data to facilitate states' ability to comprehensively and systematically measure the extent and nature of existing barriers to access, as well as to develop and monitor the effectiveness of their policies. Innovative approaches for best practice sharing will accelerate the efforts to overcome the major challenges in access to healthcare in the EU Member States.

Access high on the political agenda

The findings of PACT's survey complement EU efforts which encourage actions in a similar direction. A first step in this direction was made with the Mid-Term Review of the Europe 2020 at the EPSCO Council meeting – “Investing in Health: The ‘Missing Dimension’ of the Europe 2020 Strategy” (1 December 2014) when the issue of an outcome-based approach to healthcare management was placed high on the agenda, followed by the Preliminary opinion on Access to health services in the European Union of the Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health² which reiterated the need for enhanced international comparability of data to improve the understanding of the access-related issues.

The need for further convergence across the EU in order to address inequalities in access was further emphasised by the EU Commission in the Communication on effective, accessible and resilient health systems (April 2014)³. By acknowledging that there is no EU-wide mechanism and methodology for assessing, measuring and monitoring access, the Commission encourages efforts on sharing best practice as “an important step to reduce health inequalities”⁴. There is a long road ahead before these recommendations are transformed into practical realities.

A way forward

We, the partners of the Patient Access Partnership, encourage the EU healthcare community's relevant national and EU institutions to:

² Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/health/expert_panel/consultations/access_healthcare_en.htm

³ Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/health/healthcare/docs/com2014_215_final_en.pdf

⁴ COM (2014) 215. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/health/healthcare/docs/com2014_215_final_en.pdf

1. Employ a holistic approach in addressing access to healthcare which recognises the importance of **all five elements of access**, as defined by PACT: *availability, adequacy, accessibility, affordability, appropriateness*;
2. Ensure an open and inclusive debate with the concerned stakeholders on pragmatic health policies at the national level to address existing inequalities to ensure equity; leveraging existing stakeholder collaboration on improving access to healthcare (e.g. Vilnius Declaration, Riga Roadmap)
3. Encourage EU Member States to exchange best-practices for the development of evidence-based policies and mechanisms based on sustainability and policy coherence; and monitor implementation of the Vilnius Declaration and Riga Roadmap that provide concrete measures with regards to prevention policies, patient empowerment and access to innovative, generic and biosimilar medicines
4. Work towards convergence of the mechanisms for collection and assessment of data to ensure comparability for the benefit of measuring performance, evaluating and developing policy going forward;
5. Ensure value-added and outcome-based healthcare interventions while ensuring a balanced and predictable environment, preserving the sustainability of the healthcare system

About PACT

The [Patient Access Partnership](#) is a joint initiative led by the Bulgarian National Patients' Organization and the European Patients' Forum, and involves multiple stakeholders, including patients, European policymakers, healthcare professionals, academia, and the pharmaceutical industry. The vision of PACT is to enable different stakeholders to join forces to develop sustainable solutions and approaches to improve access to quality healthcare across Europe. "Access" has been defined by the group as encompassing the five As (5As): availability, adequacy, accessibility, affordability, and appropriateness.

By creating a structured partnership approach with a broad range of national and European actors, PACT works to identify key hurdles in access to healthcare for patients in a holistic way. While the approach is to look at healthcare systems as a whole, the activities of PACT are guided by a patient-focus, from the assessment of gaps in access to quality healthcare among Member States, to the collaboration with relevant EU-led or national initiatives on the development of practical solutions.