

Many patients in Europe 'have limited or no access' to treatment

Written by Biljana Borzan, Cristian-Silviu Buşoi, Karin Kadenbach, Andrey Kovatchev and Kateřina Konečná on 27 April 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

A cross-party interest group has been set up by MEPs to improve patient access to healthcare in Europe.



A cross-party interest group on patient access to healthcare was launched on 27 January in the European parliament, in the presence of European health and food safety commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis.

The group aims to ensure patients' access problems are high on the EU agenda, with the initiative gathering the support of almost 30 MEPs from 15 member states, and will act as a bridge between healthcare stakeholders and EU policymaking.

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Background of the initiative

Many patients in Europe have limited or no access to proper and timely diagnosis and treatment.

Inequalities in access to quality healthcare across the EU are widespread. The level of innovation in healthcare varies between and within the member states. Moreover, doctors and nurses leave their home countries to seek better working conditions in other EU countries.

As a result, in the search for solutions to serious health problems patients travel to EU member states where treatment - in some cases life-saving - exists and is easier to obtain. Limited access to healthcare services reduces quality of life and life expectancy, badly affects the workforce and puts extra strains on health and social security systems, as well as pension funds.

This issue jeopardises the economic and social performance of Europe, and member states alone cannot sufficiently address these challenges. Therefore, ensuring equal access to appropriate and high quality healthcare should be a priority for the EU institutions. In addition, the genuine involvement of stakeholders in EU policy development is crucial to finding effective solutions.

Addressing the problem, the European patient forum and the Bulgarian national patient organisation have taken the lead in creating a platform that brings together stakeholders in a constructive dialogue on the problems of access. The patient access partnership (PACT) was officially launched in December.

With the collaborative effort of patient organisations, the medical community and the industry, the ambition of the partnership is to identify gaps in and measure access to quality healthcare between and within member states and propose sustainable solutions.

The interest group on patient access to healthcare was created to provide the PACT-united stakeholders with a transparent entry point into EU policymaking. The MEPs will discuss inequalities in access and search for possible actions that could be taken at EU level, therefore supporting the efforts of the member states in tackling patients' access issues.

The group will be co-chaired by Andrey Kovatchev, Biljana Borzan, Cristian-Silviu Buşoi, Karin Kadenbach and Katerina Konečná.

Andrey Kovatchev (EPP, BG) is a co-chair of parliament's patient access to healthcare interest group

"While the focus of EU actions in the last few years has mainly been directed towards growth and job creation, none of these goals could be achieved without healthy European citizens. Healthcare is to be a priority for the EU institutions, but they have limited powers in this area.

Nevertheless, they can support the member states in improving the management of their healthcare systems. The interest group on patient access to healthcare wants to facilitate the process of finding policy solutions, both at EU and national level, because patients are paying the cost of non-Europe in the field of healthcare."

Biljana Borzan (S&D, HR) is a co-chair of parliament's patient access to healthcare interest group

"Patients and healthcare provision do not feature very prominently on the EU policy agenda. Subsidiarity remains the key word in this field. However, it is important to work together in order to ensure well-functioning health systems across the EU.

The principle of equality is enshrined in the treaties, but it is far from universal considering the current differences in healthcare and health outcomes.

There are good examples of collective EU action in the field of health and efforts have to continue. As commissioner Andriukaitis said during his hearing - we must work towards a 'health union'."

Cristian-Silviu Buşoi (EPP, RO) is a co-chair of parliament's patient access to healthcare interest group

"Health inequalities result from social and environmental determinants that vary across the EU. Many countries continue to experience inequalities which disproportionately affect socially excluded groups. There are huge differences between 'old' and 'new' Europe. While wealth in general has increased, its distribution has become increasingly unequal.

It is important to ensure that new treatments are accessible across the EU. Coordination of actions across a range of policy fields, as well as between member states, can help improve European health systems, so that these can better deliver safe health services accessible to all."

Karin Kadenbach (S&D, AT) is a co-chair of parliament's patient access to healthcare interest group

"Prevention is one of the key features of a high quality system. One of the most crucial aspects of empowering patients is health literacy. Many patients do not have enough information and knowledge about their conditions and the various treatment options, nor about their rights.

Another key element is pharmaceutical innovation and patient access to this innovation and to the best possible treatment. The European parliament should address this topic. The reimbursement agreements of the healthcare system that a patient happens to be part of should not determine this access. A commitment from all stakeholders is required."

Kateřina Konečná (GUE/NGL, CZ) is a co-chair of parliament's patient access to healthcare interest group

"Health is a value in itself and investment in health reinforces social cohesion and justice. The recent cuts, resulting from the economic crisis, have affected access to healthcare and with the help of the interest group this situation can be addressed.

In my home country, I am involved in a project called 'patient academy' that aims to strengthen patient associations and make them more professional, providing education and training to help these organisations better promote the rights of patients and their families. This project could be expanded to other member states and could therefore feature on the interest group's agenda."

The MEPs who are part of the interest group will focus on establishing good cooperation with member states' administrations and have them on board for their initiatives. In their home countries, the MEPs will advocate the European 'PACT interest group' partnership as a model to be followed by national policymakers and healthcare stakeholders.

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