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Opening speech at the 4th European Patients' Right Day 2010: "Putting citizens at the center of EU Health Policy"

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Opening speech at the 4th European Patients' Right Day 2010: "Putting citizens at the center of EU Health Policy" at the European Parliament in Brussels

Brussels, 6 May 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here to celebrate European Patients' Rights Day with you today.

I congratulate the Active Citizenship Network for having created the European Patients' Rights Day.

I was heartened to learn about the wide range of activities the Network organised on 18 April to raise awareness of the importance of patients' rights - from a contest launched by the French Health Minister to promote good practices on the use and knowledge of patients' rights - to painting competitions for young people in Romania and a wide range of activities taking place simultaneously in 60 different cities across Italy.

Patients' Rights is an issue which affects each and every one of us.

As I made clear from the outset, one of the underlying priorities of my mandate is to put patients first and consumers first.

I want all European patients to feel confident that they receive safe and high quality healthcare.

Patient Safety

To coincide with this year's Patients' Rights Day the European Commission published a Eurobarometer survey on patient safety. The findings were striking:

- Around half of the respondents felt that they could be harmed while receiving healthcare.
- Over a quarter claimed that they, or a member of their family, had experienced harm when receiving healthcare.
- Many of these events went unreported and one third of respondents did not know which organisation was responsible for patient safety in their country.

These findings reinforce the need for further action to be taken on both the quality and the safety of healthcare.

Last summer's Council of Ministers Recommendation on patient safety called for action to be taken at European level to improve patient safety through better EU coordination, reporting of incidents, more patient involvement and training of staff.

The Commission is now working to make sure that these measures are being properly implemented.

Solidarity in Health

Four years ago, coincidentally, the same year as the launch of the very first Patients Rights Day, the Council of Ministers confirmed the common values and principles in EU healthcare systems such as universality, reducing inequities, solidarity and access to good quality healthcare for all.

These fundamental values and principles underpin our Health Strategy 'Together for Health', which emphasises that health policy should be based on clear and shared values.

These values are the cornerstone of patients' rights.

Back in 2002, the Active Citizenship Network produced the European Charter of Patients' Rights with 14 fundamental rights and values. I applaud you on this initiative.

It is the commitment of organisations such as yours that give us added impetus to take decisive action to ensure that patients have the rights they need and deserve.

Within the European Union we do not have a similar Charter of Patients' Rights. This, however, does not mean that Patients' rights are not a matter of importance to the European Union.

The European Charter of Fundamental Rights explicitly reaffirms the right of:

- The promotion of respect for the patient;
- Access to healthcare under the conditions defined by each Member State; and
- The protection of personal data, which is a growing concern and one on which I will touch on a little later.

Cross-border healthcare

Access to safe and good quality healthcare is, of course, critical for patients, not only in their own country, but also across borders.

The numbers are clear: The differences in access to healthcare between Member States are alarming. The European Union has already made some progress towards securing equal access to safe and good quality healthcare across its borders.

Let's take the regulations on social security schemes for example. When someone moves from one Member State to another, he or she will be entitled to the same access to treatment as citizens from the host Member State.

You will, no doubt, be aware of the European Court of Justice rulings confirming that patients have the right to be reimbursed for healthcare received in another EU Member State.

Yet only a few patients are aware of this and only a few can afford to exercise this right.

I hope that Member States will soon give their green light to the European Commission's proposal on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, which will enable patients all over Europe to access safe and good quality treatment across borders – and be reimbursed for it.

Information to patients

Another fundamental right of patients is that to receive information about health products and services available. Such information is indispensable to empower patients to take part in decisions about their health and well-being.

Today's situation is highly unsatisfactory. Patients have very different access depending on the language they speak, on whether they are able to use Internet etc. In addition, they are often confronted with uncontrolled information or even advertising on the Internet from non-European sources.

I am determined to improve this. The pending Commission proposal provides a good opportunity to address this issue. I believe however that we have to strictly think from the patients point of view: What information do they need? Where do they want to be informed? And how do we reassure them of objective and impartial information. I am determined to work with stakeholders and with the Member States and the European Parliament to find this right balance.

Data protection

As I mentioned earlier, another issue of growing importance – and alas, of growing concern – is that of data protection.

Who amongst us has not given out personal data and has not worried about what might then happen to it?

In an EU-wide survey on people's perception of data protection two years ago, over half of respondents thought data was not properly protected in their own countries.

The EU is working to tackle this growing problem with key data protection legislation.

Medical data, for example, fall within the scope of the Data Protection Directive, which gives patients the right of protection from unauthorized access to medical data. This Directive is currently in the early stages of review to meet the evolving challenges of this very sensitive and serious issue.

Private health information must be used in the best interest of the patient. Ensuring privacy is essential so that patients can seek healthcare without fear of third parties obtaining unauthorised information on his or her health.

There is a fine balance to be struck between ensuring that nobody has access to health information other than the persons carrying out the care but, at the same time, enabling vital information to be obtained quickly, when needed.

In this respect, many Member States have had to regulate issues surrounding medical data in separate legislation due the particularly sensitive and personal nature of the data.

For instance, in France patients have the right to access medical data via their doctor if they need information on specific medical terms.

And Denmark ensures the privacy of patients by encoding or even anonymising medical data before third parties can access the medical records.

Let's not forget that medical data is essential. Medical practitioners clearly need this information to properly diagnose and treat patients. But health authorities and researchers also use the data to make improvements for the future and to carry out responsible research in health.

Indeed this issue of data privacy and data hosting is a critical one also as we seek to move forward on issues such as fighting against counterfeit medicines and on e-health. Mobile telephony and internet have the ability to assist patients in their demands for better and safer health care. However it is also clear that such operators will have to operate in a framework that guards patients against abuse of personal information.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All of us here in this room agree that equal access to safe and good quality healthcare is of great importance.

I am, within my mandate, committed to look into the alarming differences on access to healthcare throughout Europe, and will for the next five years do my utmost to reduce these inequalities. Policy makers need organisations such as the Active Citizenship Network to help drive action forward to ensure patients' rights are properly safeguarded and to raise awareness of the importance of this issue.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank these organisations for their commitment and drive, and for sharing my priority to put patients first.

Thank you.