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Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

**Commissioner Dalli delivers speech on
"Health tourism – establishing a new
culture in Europe"**

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

John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends a Symposium at the European Parliament

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"HEALTH TOURISM - ESTABLISHING A NEW CULTURE IN EUROPE"

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SPEECH

Honourable Members,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here with you today, to speak about health tourism.

For some, the term "health tourism" may carry negative connotations – the idea of patients shopping around for health services and the notion of tourist destinations promoting questionable interventions.

The reality, of course, is more complex. We now understand better the potential twin benefits linking health and tourism. And our general concept of "health" has evolved far beyond the simple treatment of diseases.

We know – and pay ever greater attention to – the essential link between health and general well-being.

Health tourism is about fostering well-being. It brings together the idea of promoting tourist services and facilities, with promoting health and well-being.

This is nothing new – think of the long history of Europe's great spas or sanatoria, for example, where for centuries people went to wind down and regain energy.

I believe in promoting good health and preventing diseases. Our objective must be to keep people well, to keep people out of hospital beds.

Promoting wellness, and fostering an environment where citizens can enjoy wellness centres across Europe, needs to be part of our efforts to promote good health.

Today, we see a wide range of "health tourism" offers including classical spas; wellness centres in tourist destinations; and specialised centres which combine treatment with wellness and tourist elements.

The availability of a health and wellness infrastructure might be an important criterion for choosing a holiday destination.

Think, for example, of the peace of mind a wellness centre could offer to older travellers who might be suffering from a chronic condition.

Health tourism is a dynamic and still emerging sector which can contribute to the Union's economy, and help tourist destinations overcome challenges such as over-reliance on a short season.

I am particularly interested in the impact of this phenomenon on health systems, and also on its potential to support our efforts to promote healthy lifestyles within our ageing society.

I am convinced that this new trend towards healthy holidays has the potential to help us promote health and to prevent chronic diseases across Europe.

In the EU, chronic diseases such as cancer, stroke and heart disease, are responsible for over 4 million deaths per year.

They are the main cause of loss of healthy life years in Europe and increasingly, across the world.

And yet many of these diseases are preventable; they are related to what people eat, drink, the air they breathe, whether or not they smoke or abuse alcohol.

Take nutrition and physical activity – obesity rates have raised dramatically in the EU in recent years. More than half of the adult population in the European Union are overweight or obese.

We need to encourage citizens to change their habits – and a holiday could be a good opportunity to start – to walk and cycle, take up sports, improve diet, or stop smoking. A healthy holiday could act as a spur to encourage citizens to lead healthier lives.

Tourist operators and destinations could, as such, make a contribution to promote healthy living and healthy ageing in our societies.

Of course, this needs follow up and support when people get back home – by making the healthy choice the easy choice when commuting, at the workplace, in schools and education.

Promoting health is at the heart of EU health policy, and addressing health determinants such as smoking, nutrition and exercise is essential if we are to curb the chronic disease in Europe.

I am also encouraged by emerging local and regional partnerships to improve health – a process in which we are supporting Member States.

My motto is to invest in promoting good health, rather than paying for treating bad health.

This is why I believe we need to take an inclusive approach, in pursue of health and wellness.

Needless to say, health tourism should not be something that only the wealthy can afford. It should be for everybody.

We can maximise health gains when health tourism is pitched not only at the high-end of the tourist market, but is mainstreamed across that market.

Our ultimate goal is to enable citizens to lead healthy lives across the life cycle, and to contribute to healthy ageing. Physically active older adults are more likely to lead healthier and more independent lives, which is highly pertinent as Europe's population ages.

This is a goal which we are pursuing through the whole range of our policies, from action on determinants to the "European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing"; which aims to translate innovative ideas into tangible products and services that respond to the needs of older Europeans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have been speaking here in favour of health tourism.

However, let me be very clear; I do not promote healthcare tourism or medical tourism, whereby people travel abroad with the sole purpose of seeking medical treatment.

I said it many times and repeat it again: I do not want to make nomads out of our patients.

People want to be treated close to their home. People do not want to travel when they are ill, unless this is unavoidable.

The flexibility to seek healthcare abroad, provided by the Directive on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, may be of particular use to people who live near a border with another Member State, or who might be faced with a long waiting list at home for a particular treatment.

My objective is to encourage Member States to provide the best possible healthcare for their own citizens in their own country. So that citizens have easy access to the care they need at home.

And this is precisely what the new Directive on patients' rights in cross border healthcare does.

The Directive provides an incentive for governments to develop their health systems so as to meet the needs of their citizens. Or else, reimburse their citizens for treatment in another Member State.

Let me stress that this Directive is not about promoting shopping around for healthcare. It does not seek to encourage patients to cross borders for medical care.

The Directive simply provides a legal framework for patients' rights already acquired through jurisprudence; within which patients are fully aware of their rights, and are in a position to use them should they choose to do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to conclude,

We must have WELLNESS as the overarching objective of our policies. We must keep people well.

To do this, we need to encourage people to take up healthy living habits.

Health and wellness tourism can play a role here, in promoting good health for all.

Thank you.

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