

Letter dated:
16 January 2007

From:
Province of Limburg
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To:
SANCO DG

Subject: Health services consultation

Our Ref.: 2007/1419

Introduction

Further to your Communication of 26 September 2006, SEC(2006) 1195/4, Consultation regarding Community action on health services, we are pleased to take this opportunity to share with you our vision of cross-border care.

We are pleased that the Commission has launched a consultation pertaining to cross-border healthcare. In this way, you can find out whether further action on healthcare is needed at European level, and if so, in which fields.

You emphasise that European action will be intended mainly to obtain legal clarity about the rights and obligations of patients and care providers wishing to obtain/offer treatment in another Member State. The Commission takes the view that the case law of the Court of Justice should be established in a legislative framework. You also — to our great satisfaction — highlight possibilities for European cooperation in areas such as the establishment of European networks of collaborating specialist providers. Evidently, this will contribute to financially sustainable, high-quality healthcare in Europe over the long term.

Cross-border movement of patients

The Dutch province of Limburg is largely surrounded by Belgium and Germany, with large centres of population close by. This means that, if necessary, patients will cross the border to use a treatment provider.

Around the turn of the millennium, the flow of patients across the border grew strongly, as a result, inter alia, of long waiting lists for hospitals in the Netherlands.

We have also observed that ever more health institutions are cooperating with institutions over the border, offering patients a broader range of treatments.

In Limburg and the surrounding regions, the ageing of the population will increase the pressure on healthcare. Cooperation between providers in Limburg and abroad, in the surrounding regions, can help to guarantee efficient, cost-effective, high-quality provision (for example, cooperation in the fields of hospital care, ambulance, nursing, home-help and youth care provision). The demand will increase as more people move across the border (currently, several tens of thousands of Limburgers live in Belgium). Europe offers opportunities for Limburg's health system, including an improvement in

the accessibility of care, a range of services customised more to patients' needs and less restrictive regulations.

An international labour market for healthcare staff will also be important in the future to meet the increasing demand for elderly care, in particular.

Opportunities for the future

Many pilot projects have been carried out recently in the 'Euregios' in the cross-border healthcare sector. For example, three teaching hospitals (Aachen, Liège and Maastricht) in the Meuse-Rhine Euregio have stepped up their cooperation.

In this context, Aachen and Maastricht hospitals are looking at whether to set up a 'European Ion Therapy Institute'.

Over the past ten to fifteen years, the Province of Limburg, with the aid of Interreg projects in the field of cross-border care, in line with the needs and desires of the local population, has laid a firm foundation. We feel that our province can continue to blaze a trail in the creation of a truly borderless Europe.

Currently, the Euregios are the most promising experimental contexts for cross-border healthcare. It is hoped that these experiments will be extended and develop into regular practices, with the administrative procedures for patients being streamlined.

- An experiment in cross-border healthcare

Selecting the Meuse-Rhine Euregio as a testing ground for healthcare could provide a short-term solution. The Commission, some time ago, described this region as a model region for cross-border healthcare. In an experimental context, problems occurring can be investigated and solved, and a results-oriented approach can provide insight so that the rules and legal provisions governing the various health systems can be approximated where necessary.

- Financing

We agree with the Maastricht teaching hospital that red-tape forms a significant obstacle to practising real cross-border cooperation on the ground. The rules must be amended so that we can respond to the increasing demand and need for cross-border care. Although the possibility of the financing structure of hospitals being further liberalised in the near future provides some relief, a specific solution by way of targeted regulation is necessary.

In the Netherlands, hospitals are funded by a budget system in which there is no possibility of generating more revenue by treating patients from abroad, which forms an obstacle to successful cross-border cooperation.

This is all the more problematic as, on this side of the border, investment is being made in developing 'treatment tourism' from abroad.

- Euregio planning framework for top reference care.

We have opted for a Euregio planning framework for top reference care in order to achieve complementarity in border regions. National statutory obstacles in this area restrict effective and successful cross-border collaboration.

The development of centres of excellence should also be developed.

What are we doing?

The cross-border movement of patients offers unmistakably opportunities to further develop healthcare and the associated research. In the light of this situation, our objectives for the coming period are to:

- strive to become an innovative knowledge economy;
- respond proactively to demographic developments;
- make maximum use of cross-border cooperation.

These factors define Limburg's strategy and thus the associated international approach.

We realise that we can also learn from colleagues abroad and must work with them to solve problems in Limburg and develop the opportunities here. This relates to problems and opportunities for the economy, the physical environment and the welfare of the Limburg population.

The Eindhoven-Leuven-Aachen triangle is vital for the economic development of Limburg. The quality of our air and water is determined largely abroad, and collaboration in the Euregios is becoming ever more important for the future of healthcare and youth care in Limburg.

The above demonstrates that an international approach and international action are vital for the development of Limburg, at both cross-border and inter-regional levels.

The 'acceleration agenda', a programme of this province aiming to promote economic renewal and development, forms a leading part of this priority. Limburg has taken the first steps towards developing into a top technological region. In order to achieve this goal, new high quality industry is being developed.

What would we ask of you?

Action in the following areas is important, in order to promote accessibility for patients and the quality of the care offered at European level:

1) The Member States must be encouraged to make practical bilateral agreements, with the starting principle being the provision of easy access to care to residents of other Member States. These agreements should include possible approaches to:

- changing the way hospitals are funded;
- creating an international planning framework for top reference care;
- developing centres of excellence.

2) Encouraging the mobility of health professionals, taking into account the training aspect and the potential for a brain-drain from the supplying countries.

3) Monitoring cross-border care at European level, with a focus on the exchange of expertise, mapping cross-border flows and comparing financial systems.

4) Encouraging and implementing a European patient network.

We hope that this will spur you on to further action in the area of cross-border healthcare.

Limburg Provincial Executive

Chairman

[signed]

Secretary

[signed]

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