IRISH
SENIOR CITIZENS
PARLIAMENT
VOICE OF THE ELDERLY

Submission from the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament to the European Commission on the "Consultation process on European Commission Green Paper on the European workforce for Health".

Introduction

The Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament is a representative organisation of Older People in Ireland, working to promote the views of older people in policy development and decision-making. The ISCP currently has 426 affiliated organisations comprising a membership totalling of 120,000 people giving it a genuine mandate to be the **Voice of Older People in Ireland.**

Our comments in this submission are made in the context of what is best for older people and their interests.

Background

Europe's Population is ageing; the average life expectancy across Europe is over 80 years today. With the baby boomers now at retiring age it is expected by the European Commission that the number of people aged between 65 and 80 will increase by almost 40% by 2030.

This is true too of Ireland, recent years have seen a large increase in the numbers of older people in Ireland, and current indications show that the number of older people in Ireland and their proportion in the overall population will continue to grow in future decades. According to the Irish Central Statistics Office the proportion of people in Ireland aged 65+ is due to increase to almost 24% of the population by 2050.

Demography and the promotion of a sustainable health workforce

- The fact that European people are living longer lives than ever before is a great achievement, and is a direct result of the advances in health care, medicine and technology; however this demographic change is not without its implications.

- An ageing population places greater emphasis and importance on the Health Systems across Europe as the numbers of people with high levels of dependency increase.

- As a result the European health workforce is now under increasing pressure due to the demographic climate comprising of the largest number of Older People to date and a much smaller productive workforce, not to mention the current economic threats across Europe.

- If the EU is to provide an adequate and accessible to all healthcare service across its member states some changes will have occur.

- It is important however to note that the provision and cost of healthcare varies hugely across member states at present.

- The long term goal of any health care reform across Europe should seek to deliver healthcare in all countries free at point of delivery for all.

Public Health Capacity

- Workplace related illness' such as stress, places a huge emphasis on the need protect and improve the health of the general population. It is also important that the increased demand for healthcare doesn't impact on the health of those working within health systems.

- The increasing number of Older People and the associated illness's and medical complications in later life increase the need for strong and accessible health systems.

- It is important that adequate healthcare is available to all who require it especially to the older population for whom it carries such weight.

- All EU countries need to look at cross border examples and share expertise.

Training

- The care of Older People is being privatised due to a lack of capacity.

- The ISCP welcomes the new flexible qualification criteria for GP's in Ireland.

- Qualifications for health care workers must be recognised throughout the EU.

- Any introduction of telehealth or telemedicine will require the up-skilling and some re-training of healthcare professionals.

- The changing demographics in Europe places an increased demand on the health sector it is therefore extremely important that the health work force grows with our ageing population to meet the increased need, vigorous recruitment campaigns are required to fulfil this demand.

- There is also a need for community training and community awareness campaigns.

Managing mobility of health workers within the EU

- An electronic employment record system could be established as a means of monitoring the flows of health workers between countries and their performance.

- Any barriers preventing the health workforce from being mobile should be removed at all levels of the health workforce.

Global Migration of Health Workers

- The ISCP supports the free movement of health workers to work in another member state however; for Older People language barriers can often present difficulties.

- It is important that there are adequate numbers of health care workers / professionals in all EU countries.

- Qualifications for health care workers must be recognised throughout the EU.

- Any recruitment / training programmes must aim to ensure that there are adequate health workers in every country.

- Where shortages exist patients should be encouraged to travel.

Data to support decision-making

- Each member state must be required to have adequate data and population projections.

- Data with regard to shortages of healthcare workers should be collated.

- Every individual must have an electronic patient record that is easily transportable across the EU and can help in decision making especially in relation to Older People.

- These decision support systems can be used in conjunction with the electronic patient records.

- We are aware that in some Nordic countries there has been development in healthcare provision which has seen the use of online patient journal and digital prescriptions.

- Planning and future projection is required by all countries in order to be aware of the required number of healthcare workers required in advance.

The impact of new technology: improving the efficiency of the health workforce

- There are many associated advantages and benefits to the use technology in healthcare in the form of telehealth and telemedicine to both patients and healthcare workers.

- While telehealth and telemedicine carry many benefits for all patients they will be of a special benefit to Older People and can play a very important role in the management of chronic diseases mostly associated with old age.

- However the development and availability of these services has been slow across member states. There has been little or no mainstreaming of such services and in the majority of countries the developments are at pilot or trial activity stage.

- The UK has seen the largest trial to date; The Department of Health has introduced "Whole System Demonstrators" to test the benefits of integrated care supported by advanced assistive technology. Schemes will focus on frail elderly at risk of current or future hospital admission, who have complex health and social care needs. They may have chronic heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or type 2 diabetes. The "Whole System Demonstrator Programme" will test the potential of innovative technologies like telecare and telehealth in supporting care for those with complex health and social care needs. Source: www.doh.co.uk

- Telehealth services in Ireland are very under developed and no major national pilot or trials have taken place, there have been some isolated, local small scale trials, although these did not focus on Older People. There has however been some development within hospitals of Tele-Radiology, Tele-Cardiology and Tele-Oncology.

- Any mainstreaming of telehealth services across Europe has been quite localised involving one provider or cluster of integrated providers.

- We have heard of some development of home telehealth to support chronic disease management and also early discharge from hospital (hospital-at-home). The main providers of home telehealth services to date have been hospitals and in some cases in collaboration with GP's.

- While the use of telehealth and telemedicine could reduce healthcare costs, the initial development of technology is expensive, there are associated ethical concerns and the provision of services requires organisational change within health systems.

- There are other barriers such as stigma and fear of the unknown attached to services such as telehealth especially for the older patient.

- In saying this they do provide a time and cost saving approach and help to tackle geographic inequalities across the EU.

- The use of telehealth and telemedicine can reduce and eliminate travel times for people. This is important for people with reduced mobility or limited access to public transport.

- The use of electronic patient records allows practitioners to view a patient entire health history in one viewing and gives patients the choice to move between various services and countries.

- It is important not to de-humanise healthcare as we know that practitioners especially in the form of GP's and community services which play an important social role in the community. They are often the initial access to point to specialised services and are a great information source most notably for Older People.

- If Telehealth and Telemedicine are to take off in Europe there is a need for increased awareness and promotion of associated benefits, there is also a need for incentives for healthcare providers under existing reimbursement systems.

- Any further development and implementation of these services will require the drawing up and enforcement of a set of standards.

The role of health professional entrepreneurs in the workforce

- There is a need for more public-private collaborations / partnerships in the delivery of healthcare services in Europe, the EU could aim to encourage this through innovative uses of public procurement.

Conclusions

- It is important that adequate health systems are in place to meet the demands of an ageing population.

- There should be no inequalities across health systems and countries within Europe.

- Adequate and affordable healthcare must be a right to be available to all.

- Technology plays an important role in wiping out geographical inequalities in relation to health care and the further development of such technology should be encouraged.

- The associated benefits of technology in healthcare delivery need to be highlighted.

- A happy, healthy workforce is essential in ensuring efficient health systems.

- The long term goal of health systems across Europe going forward should seek to deliver adequate and accessible healthcare in all countries free at point of delivery for all.