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European Commission Green Paper: European Workforce for Health

1. The College welcomes the opportunity to reply to this consultation on the European Commission's Green Paper.
2. The Royal College of General Practitioners is the largest membership organisation in the United Kingdom solely for GPs. It aims to encourage and maintain the highest standards of general medical practice and to act as the 'voice' of GPs on issues concerned with education, training, research, and clinical standards. Founded in 1952, the RCGP has over 36,000 members who are committed to improving patient care, developing their own skills and promoting general practice as a discipline.
3. This European Commission Green Paper sets out the issues and dynamics of European health workforce well. It puts forward several good ideas that could be taken forward at member state level. Our comments below are aimed, as is the Green Paper, at the breadth of the health workforce.

Sustainable Workforce

4. Retirement ages across the EU vary. It could be worthwhile to consider, with relevant stakeholders, increasing the retirement age. Another option would be to better support "phased retirement" whereby workers steadily reduced their hours towards full retirement. It may be appropriate for their role during this period to change in nature away from active clinical practices towards mentoring or other roles. As suggested "return to practice" schemes could also aid retention and may be especially effective in the UK for the social care workforce.

Public Health Capacity

5. Occupation Health: It is important that employers, as well as employees, receive good occupational health advice. Whilst improved occupational health advice is to be welcomed it will be a small step in addressing the needs of an ageing population.
6. Self care: We would support the principle of encouraging and empowering patients to better manage their own care. This has benefits, when properly managed, for patients and can help reduce pressure on the health workforce.

Training

7. It is important that as the population across the EU ages training capacity for diseases affecting the elderly is increased. There should also be a greater emphasis on the prevention of disease.

Impact of technology

8. Tele-medicine and outsourcing that is made possible through improved technology can have benefits when appropriately managed. However, a lack of agreement on common standards can cause logistical problems and worse harm patient safety. It is sometimes hard to agree common

standards within an individual member state, agreeing this across member states will take time and needs to be approached in a considered way.

Health Professional Entrepreneurs

9. The concept of the Health Professional Entrepreneur put forward in this Green Paper is an interesting one that would benefit from further practical exploration. Many of the characteristics outlined in the concept are central to UK General Practice. Four of the main elements of the UK primary care system can provide valuable insight: to this:
 - First contact access for each new need
 - Long term person (not disease) focused care
 - Comprehensive care for most diseases
 - Coordinate care when it must be sought elsewhere
10. Protocol based care is resource intensive, requiring many staff and technology, compared to decision based care which relies on good professional judgment. We would support the inference from this paper that decision based care, by well trained professionals, can help reduce pressures on the workforce and improve patient experiences. With increased stresses on the European health system professionals should be increasingly trained with the capacity to make decisions with patients based on patient choice and based on evidence.
11. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Mrs Ailsa Donnelly, Dr Tony Mathie and Dr Andrew Spooner towards the above comments. While contributing to this response, it cannot be assumed that those named all necessarily agree with all of the above comments.

Yours sincerely

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Honorary Secretary of Council

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