



APPLICATION OF THE EUROPEAN REFERENCE NETWORKS MODEL IN EUROPEAN CROSS-BORDER HEALTHCARE COOPERATION

Opinion by the Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health (EXPH)

European Reference Networks (ERNs) allow health professionals in EU Member States to share experience in the treatment of rare diseases. A health professional who is treating a patient with one of the rare diseases covered by the ERN programme can have access to leading experts from across Europe, sharing knowledge and best practice, evaluating outcomes together. This would otherwise be difficult, especially for those in the smaller countries who are unlikely to have much experience with such patients. The Expert Panel was asked whether the ERN approach might also be applied to other areas of health care. Specifically, three questions were posed regarding the ERN model:

1 ARE THERE OTHER AREAS WHERE EUROPEAN REFERENCE NETWORKS MIGHT BE APPROPRIATE?

While the ERN model is appropriate for conditions that are rare and complex, other mechanisms will be more suitable where these criteria do not apply.

2 SHOULD THE ERN MODEL BE USED AS A WHOLE?

The ERN programme envisages a range of activities, including development of guidelines and providing a basis for research. The precise mix should be a matter for individual ERNs, reflecting the needs of the patients expected to benefit.

3 HOW SHOULD NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS INTEGRATE SUCH NETWORKS INTO THEIR NATIONAL FRAMEWORK?

The ERN model adds value to national health systems through its focus on information and knowledge exchange. However, to maximise their contribution, ERNs must ensure that health professionals are aware of their activities and the opportunities they provide, something that the Expert Panel felt was not always the case yet, while recognising that the ERNs are still at an early stage.

CONCLUSION

Although, in theory, the ERN approach could facilitate access to high-quality health care and cooperation at EU level, beyond rare diseases, it is too early to consider extending the ERN model to other areas, since there has not been enough time to fully evaluate their costs and benefits. More information is needed on the long-term sustainability of ERN financing, and on the benefits it brings to Member States. For other areas, it is important that the full range of opportunities to collaborate across the EU level are used as appropriate.

About the Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health

The Expert Panel's mission is to provide sound and independent advice in the form of opinions in response to questions (mandates) submitted by the Commission on matters related to health care. The opinions of the Expert Panel present the views of the independent scientists who are members of the Expert Panel. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission. **For more information and to read the opinions in full:** https://ec.europa.eu/health/expert_panel/home_en