

The Luxembourg Declaration on Patient Safety: a political comment

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Abstract

Services provided for European citizens' healthcare are not services like standard commercial services. Healthcare services need to be accessible, independent of the citizen's economic or social background and should at the same time be available to all at the best possible quality level.

The Luxembourg Declaration on Patient Safety recognizes these challenging fundamental principles. Patient safety is a key aspect for all European policy makers, as it is a vital question of equitable access to health care. Nevertheless we know that unfortunately a considerable amount of avoidable safety events still occur all across Europe!

However differently organized our national health systems may be, it is vital to share experience and knowledge at a European level in order to be able to learn from the experiences of the different member-states. No uniform solution can be found and decreed from the bottom down, nevertheless Europe can contribute and help to raise standards by a common effort.

The Luxembourg Declaration is a launching pad for European progress in this field as it sets important goals and demonstrates the steps to be undertaken. It is a calling and gives us hope for measurable progress in the future.

Key words: patient safety, Europe

During the first six months of this year Luxembourg has had the privilege to hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This was a unique occasion for me to support a large number of initiatives ranging from obesity, mental health, rare diseases, cardio-vascular diseases, the global answer to HIV, eHealth and, last but not least, Patient Safety.

I strongly believe that services provided to European citizens in the health domain are not services that can be likened to standard commercial services: these services require a lot more. Health care needs to be and stay accessible; independent of the citizen's economic or social background. It should, at the same time be available to all at the highest level of quality!

These challenging fundamental principles are recognized by the Luxembourg Declaration on Patient Safety, which highlights that: *"Access to high quality healthcare is a key human right (...) Accordingly, patients have a right to expect that every effort is made to ensure their safety as users of all health services."*

We know from scientific investigations that although some of the most advanced and complex technologies are used in the healthcare domain, a considerable amount of avoidable safety events still occur. This should alert all policy makers, as it is a vital question of equitable access to health care. Furthermore, there are scientific

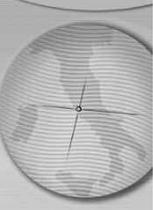
indications that establishing a culture of patient safety, in the long run, a factor contributing to the sustainability of health care, as it reduces costs arising from a lack of quality treatment.

It is important for healthcare professionals, as well as for patients and public authorities, to understand that progress in the field of patient safety can only be reached locally through an open and collaborative culture and not by a blame and shame attitude. Patient safety needs the help of patients and all health professionals: it is about making it happen together!

How should the EU contribute to this issue and why is this question relevant to at the European level?

European health care systems are organized quite differently from one member-state to another. This diversity is one of Europe's strengths and I strongly believe that the design of the most suitable health care systems should remain a mainly domestic affair. In the field of patient safety this means that no uniform solution can be found and decreed from the top down.

Nevertheless, in this field it is important like in many others that joint efforts are taken, together with our partners at the WHO Alliance for Patient Safety. However differently organized our national health systems may be, it is vital to share experiences and knowledge at a European level in order to be able to learn from the experiences of



different member-states and to be able to commonly raise standards throughout the whole European community.

Patient Safety is of vital importance; patients are the first to be concerned by a lack of quality, as in some cases their life simply depends upon it. Therefore it should be a field that utilises open methods of cooperation including working within the EU framework. With patients becoming more and more mobile within Europe, Patient Safety will characteristically become more transnational.

Although some countries like Denmark, the UK or the Czech Republic to mention only a few, have already gained valuable experience in this field, all EU-member states, not excluding my own country, have to make considerable efforts in patient safety.

I was more than grateful to the Standing Committee of European Doctors and their partners to propose to organize under the Luxembourg Presidency the Conference on

Patient Safety that lead to the Luxembourg Declaration.

The concept of the Conference and the success of the Declaration rely on the diversity of the participants involved in providing input into the declaration, as well as exchanging knowledge and experiences within the framework of the Conference. It also demonstrates why patient safety must be dealt with in a common multidisciplinary approach, involving industry, health care professionals and patient stakeholders.

The Luxembourg Declaration is a launching pad for joint European progress in this field, including the setting important goals and exploring the first steps which need to be taken. This momentum is being maintained by the UK Presidency and will be continued by the forthcoming Austrian Presidency, in the best interest of all European patients. I am therefore convinced that from our combined efforts we will soon be able to see that the promotion of patient safety has lead to concrete results throughout Europe.