



European Union vows to promote cross-border cooperation to reduce health inequalities

The percentage of such operations carried out on an outpatient basis also varies considerably throughout Europe. In those three counties, for example, the percentage of cataract operations performed on an outpatient basis ranges from 96.5% in Denmark, to 62% in Italy, and to 35% in Portugal.

Eliminating health inequalities is only one of the goals of his term as EU commissioner, Mr. Kyprianou added.

Other health priorities for the EU over the next few years will include:

- Ensuring that the EU can collectively protect itself against threats to health;
- Acting early to promote health and prevent illness;
- Making better use of resources by helping European health systems work together;
- Providing a solid base of information and evidence for policy decisions;
- Giving citizens a voice in the health issues that affect them;

The EU is pinning much of its hope to reach such goals by promoting the greater use of electronic health information to improve the safety and efficiency of ophthalmic and other medical care.

As part of its role in promoting greater use of electronic health information, the EU will launch a web-based "Health Portal" later this year. The Portal will provide a "one-stop shop" for nurses, technicians, physicians, administrators and patients to access EU-produced health information and also to link to the websites of national health authorities, hospitals, professional organisations, and patient groups.

For further information on EU health policies and programmes go to: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/>.

The European Union has vowed to foster more cooperation among ophthalmic nurses, technicians and other health professionals to reduce health inequalities between countries.

In a major address to the Conference of German Health Ministers in June in Munich, the EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, Markos Kyprianou, said the EU would devote its resources to helping countries with poor health outcomes learn from their better-performing neighbours.

"Cooperation is the key to unlocking the potential to share and promote best practice in health right across the European Union," Mr. Kyprianou told the conference.

He stated that by promoting more cooperation between nurses, technicians, and physicians across borders, the EU could reduce the divergent outcomes between its 25 member countries. "For example, five-year survival rates for breast cancer range from 81% in Swedish women to 58% in Slovakia and Poland," he noted. "Or take skin cancer – for malignant melanoma, five-year survival rates vary from 89% in Sweden and 86% in the Netherlands, to 62% in Estonia, 64% in Poland and 68% in Italy."

"This is a stark illustration of the potential we have to learn from each other – to look at the successes in one part of the Union and to examine how we can replicate this success elsewhere," he added.

As ophthalmic nurses and technicians well know, such inequalities are rife within cataract surgery. For instance, the rate of cataract surgery varies from 784 per 100,000 of population in Italy, to 514 per 100,000 in Denmark and 221 per 100,000 in Portugal.

eHEALTH INITIATIVES ADDING TO EFFICIENCY

At a special EU ministerial conference on eHealth in Norway earlier this year, the EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media, Viviane Reding, said that all health sectors in Europe have a duty to promote eHealth initiatives to promote patient safety and improve care efficiency.

Commissioner Reding noted that EU-sponsored electronic medical records projects are already proving the value of eHealth not only in improving the quality and safety of care but also in cutting waste.

"The European approach to eHealth should be about spending euros on patients not on paperwork," she said.

Ms. Reding pointed to a Danish electronic medical records project that is already saving about €1 million a year and which could save €3.5 million a year if all specialist referrals were sent electronically from general practitioners to ophthalmologists and other specialists.

The foundation for the EU-wide Health Portal was laid in Denmark, where an advanced version of the project enables all Danish citizens with a recognised digital signature to review their own complete electronic medical file and to communicate with their own doctor to make an appointment. Equally, the Health Portal enables healthcare professionals to search for information on their patients. With similar networks also now in place in Norway and Sweden, the EU has allocated funds to create a cross-national Baltic Health Network to connect the three countries with two hospital networks in Lithuania and Estonia.

For details of the Danish Health Portal and Baltic Health Network, visit: <http://www.cfst.dk/>.

To ensure that the Health Portal project and other eHealth initiatives continue to meet the needs of patients, the EU has sponsored a number of research initiatives, including projects to create a sustainable, web-accessible, public health information system and to examine patients' use of and attitudes to information and communication technologies. In addition, the EU will fund the writing of a package of standards, specifications, guidelines and training materials that EU countries can use to help implement eHealth technologies more effectively.

Results from a number of leading EU-funded eHealth projects may ultimately prove valuable to ophthalmic nurses and technicians. Those projects include:

Wrapping together health information from Internet

The EU-funded research project known by the acronym of "WRAPIN," facilitates more reliable online advice for patients and individuals. As part of the project, WRAPIN has applied new technological developments to improve medical term mapping, indexing, and searching.

For details, visit: <http://dbs.cordis.lu/> and follow links.

Integrating information on chronically ill patients

A project known by the acronym "CHRONIC" helps coordinate patient-handling information, support for monitoring and transmitting vital signs, and use of portable equipment in the homes of chronically ill people in the region around Barcelona, Spain.

For details, visit: <http://dbs.cordis.lu/> and follow links.