Health care and care to the elderly: supporting national strategies for ensure a high level of social protection

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PURPOSE : to present a joint report from the Commission on health care and care for the elderly : supporting national strategies for ensuring a high level of social protection. CONTENT : the Barcelona European Council invited the Commission and the Council to examine more thoroughly the questions of access, quality and financial sustainability. For this purpose, a questionnaire was submitted to the Member States. This report draws the main conclusions from the analysis of the Member States' responses and proposes future steps. The replies from Member States confirm the usefulness of the three broad objectives of access, quality and sustainability as a basis for looking at policies for health care and long-term care for the elderly. All Member States are trying to find the best balance between these three goals: how to raise enough funding to secure adequate care for all, with high quality; how to provide services more cost-effectively? The Member States' replies show that seeking this balance poses a major challenge for the overall management of systems. Thus, many national replies refer to the need to ensure good decision making at the interface between their health care and the emerging long-term care sectors and a better co-ordination of health care provisions and long-term care services for the elderly. Achieving the best balance also raises governance issues; there needs to be a balance between the focus on quality, standards and cost control which are often centrally driven on the one hand, and local management and delivery, on the other. While it was not an explicit objective of the questionnaire, some Member States' replies point to the large employment challenges and opportunities in the care sector. The challenges include: how to retain staff under sometimes rather difficult working conditions; how to recruit and train new staff as demand increases over the next decades; and how to develop the quality of work, by providing skill development and career progression, in the sector. 1) In relation to access, Member States express their determination to maintain general and comprehensive access as a cornerstone of their systems, even in the face of increasing costs, with several proposing to further refine and improve their access mechanisms. 2) In the area of quality, the replies reveal that there is scope for greater co-operation between Member States in the area of quality of service delivery regarding both health and long-term care. This is particularly true in the perspective of greater crossborder mobility of patients and enlargement. The Community's action programme in the field of public health, which will come into force in January 2003, will help in developing tools for quality assessment. 3) Regarding financial sustainability, Member States point to the challenge of ensuring that resources and in particular new technologies can be deployed in the interest of efficiency and cost effectiveness and of ensuring that health professionals and patients integrate cost considerations into their decisions. The Commission invites the Council, on the basis of this Communication, to adopt the joint report requested by the Barcelona European Council and to submit it to the Spring 2003 European Council. A process of mutual learning and co-operative exchange should be continued on the basis of the issues identified in the joint report. The Commission will present in autumn 2003 further proposals for pursuing this co-operation. That Communication should also cover the specific aspects of these issues related to the enlargement of the European Union. Co-operation between Member States could concentrate on exchanging experiences and best practice with regard to each of the three broad objectives. There should be a particular focus on improving the information base and on indicators as a basis for such co-operation, drawing on the existing close co-operation between Eurostat and the OECD in this area. It would also be useful to pay particular attention to employment issues.