Public health: Community action programme 1997-2001 on health monitoring

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The draft report by Mr Danilo POGGIOLINI (EPP, I) on a Commission proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision adopting a programme of Community action on health monitoring in the context of the framework for action in the field of public health was adopted. Also known as the "Health Indicators Programme", this is the fourth programme submitted by the Commission as a follow-up to its Communication of 24 November 1993 (COM (93) 559), which laid down a framework for Community public health measures in accordance with Article 129 of the Treaty on European Union. The health indicators programme seeks to develop a high-quality health monitoring system which will help to shape and assess the health policies of the Community and the Member States. The lack of uniform health data makes a coherent approach to health policy impossible in the Member States and at Community level. In his explanatory statement, Mr Poggiolini, who is a doctor by profession, said the aim of the health monitoring system was to provide decision-makers with the information they needed to analyse as effectively as possible the current health situation and likely trends so that they could make choices decisive for the future of health systems and for the health protection of European citizens. He had damning words for the Commission proposal:"While the communication [accompanying the proposal] sets out clearly and precisely the objectives, principles, methods and structure of the Community health monitoring system, the proposal for a decision itself is no more than a pale substitute, vague in its structure, hesitant in its approach and linguistically unclear". In particular, Mr Poggiolini condemned the proposed budget of ECU 13.8 million as "genuinely inadequate". Taking a sideswipe at the Community's subsidies for tobacco production, "when every one knows that smoking is bad for health", he persuaded the committee to adopt an amendment to the Commission proposal upping the figure to ECU 20 million. The committee threw out an amendment from Parliament's Committee on Budgets which would have rejected the Commission proposal outright on financial grounds. In another amendment to the Commission proposal, the committee, taking its cue from the European Drugs Observatory, called for feasibility studies to be carried out on the setting up of a permanent European Health Observatory to monitor and evaluate health data and indicators in the Community. It also stressed that Community support was needed for the establishment or improvement of databases in the Member States. Another amendment called for the development of cooperation with the competent international organizations, including the World Health Organization and the OECD, health professionals and governmental or non-governmental organizations in the area covered by the programme. Definitions of such terms as "hospital bed" should be harmonized as should methods of collecting national health data. The committee adopted a number of amendments tabled by Parliament's Committee on Social Affairs and Employment. One of these called for importance to be attached to cooperation in the field of occupational health and safety. Another called on the Commission to submit to Parliament reports evaluating the results of Community health programmes. To complement the programme, the committee thought that health care authorities and providers in all Member States should, in consultation with the health profession, set measurable time-based targets for health improvement appropriate to their national conditions. Such targets would focus the effort, enhance the cost-effectiveness and facilitate the assessment of the Union's health policies. Summing up its goals in another amendment, the committee decided:"It is only from knowledge of the facts of public health in Europe, obtained by setting up a Community health monitoring system, that it will be possible to monitor public health trends and define public health priorities and objectives."