Effects of discriminatory health care to persons with multiple sclerosis in the Union. Petition 842 /2001

2003/2173(INI) - 27/11/2003

The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Uma AALTONEN (Greens/EFA, FIN) on a petition (840/201) on the effects of discriminatory treatment afforded to multiple sclerosis (MS) sufferers within the EU. The report pointed out that over the last 20 years considerable progress had been made in understanding MS and in ways of detecting it early and improving the quality of life of sufferers, provided that they had access financially and technically to the necessary treatment. In practice, however, this was not always the case, as the petition, submitted by an MS sufferer, had made clear: the treatment available to sufferers could vary depending on their Member State and even within Member States. Disparities could exist in access to medicine, medical refunds or any psychological, financial or other aid a sufferer may need. Patients were far too often simply left to cope with their physical and mental distress. MEPs deplored this situation and said that a "principal objective" of the health authorities in the EU should be to guarantee equal access to therapies and treatments as well as the provision of optimum services, through coordinated programmes drawn up in conjunction with the World Health Organisation. The committee wanted a debate on this subject to be placed on the agenda of a forthcoming meeting of EU Health Ministers, and also called for an epidemiological study funded by the EU to be carried out as a matter of urgency Europe-wide. In addition, the committee wanted the Member States to develop specialist clinics and nursing homes designed to meet the specific needs of sufferers, in particular younger ones, as well as the necessary professional training for medical and hospital staff. It stressed that the cost-effectiveness of drug therapies for sufferers of MS and other long-term chronic diseases should be measured not only through clinical trials but also through an assessment of the improvement in the quality of life as a result of new treatment, which could help bring about savings in other sectors of social or welfare budgets. MEPs also underlined the need to foster advanced research in this field through international cooperation, in the field of genetics and other areas. They further recommended that MS sufferers be integrated into the world of work by means of practical provisions that take account of their condition (including better access to buildings and transport), so that they can become as independent as possible. MEPs emphasised that many sufferers were currently coerced into giving up work against their will, even though studies had shown that continued work had positive mental effects which could reduce the progression of the disease. Lastly, they called on the Commission to put forward a proposal for a comprehensive Disability Rights Directive on the basis of proposals made by Parliament's Disability Inter-Group.