

EXPERT PANEL ON EFFECTIVE WAYS OF INVESTING IN HEALTH

Request for an expert opinion: Access to health care

Background – Rationale

The economic and financial crisis that started in 2008, and had a particular impact in the EU after 2010, highlighted the importance of a deeper look to the dimension of access in health systems.

The way access to health care has been analysed proved to have weaknesses. Major barriers to access are difficult to identify. Available indicators for coverage, waiting times and affordability are either non-existent or have proven to be inadequate. The measurement of self-perception of unmet needs for care is useful but does not allow an objective measurement of access and may leave out the most relevant population groups.

Barriers to health care can be multiple: financial, administrative, geographical, legal, cultural, linked to the organisation of the health system, to lack of transparency and of clear separation between public and private sector and to corruption, affecting particular groups of the population or simply resulting from insufficient or inadequate distribution of resources in the system. The identification of major blockages affecting access to health care is crucial for the initiation of action leading to the maintenance of the values of the EU health systems and of their effectiveness.

Recently a debate, mainly driven by patients' organisations and involving a wide range of stakeholders, has been taking place on the issue of equity of access to health care. This has led to the creation of a stakeholders' partnership on access to health care in 2014. An MEP interest group on access to health care was launched in late January 2015. The Commission has been participating in the discussions resulting from these initiatives and wants to identify possible areas for future work.

The Communication from the Commission on effective, accessible and resilient health systems, adopted in April 2014, defined 'increasing accessibility to health care' as one of the three pillars for an EU agenda for health systems. The Communication stresses that access to health care is the result of interaction between different factors, including health systems coverage, depth of coverage, affordability of care, and availability of care.

Concerns on access to health care have been reflected in recommendations to Member States in the 2013 and 2014 European Semesters.

Terms of Reference

The Expert Panel on Effective ways of Investing in Health is requested to give its views on options for action to improve equity of access to health care in the EU.

In particular, the Expert Panel is requested to provide its assessment on the following points:

1. Overall impact of poor access.

How do limitations and variations in access to health care affect the EU health systems and the broader economy?

2. Measuring and monitoring.

Which are the vulnerable groups that can more easily suffer of a reduced access to health care? Can the Expert Panel provide a taxonomy of these groups, highlighting the main mechanisms of exclusion?

What can policy makers, professional and patients' associations, and other stakeholders do to identify timely problems in access to health care, inequalities in access affecting the most vulnerable population groups and to reduce variation in health care? Which monitoring tools are already in place and which tools could be developed?

3. Acceptable variations.

How can the limits of an acceptable variation in health care provision and access to health care within and across Member States be defined?

4. Policy measures

How can the main barriers to access be overcome? Which tools can be used to tackle unmet needs for health care and unwarranted variation? Which role can the financing model of the system, legislative tools or best-practice sharing play? With regard to this point, the opinion of the Expert Panel should focus on general policies and actions which can be taken at health service level.

Additionally, the Expert Panel is requested to reflect on how the added-value of EU action on access to health care may be maximised.

Timing

The opinion of the Expert Panel should be finalised by June 2015.

Background documents

Commission Communication on effective, accessible and resilient health systems
http://ec.europa.eu/health/healthcare/docs/com2014_215_final_en.pdf