

Reportage

1 November 2008



Introduction

The NHS European Office, which is part of the NHS Confederation and funded by the Strategic Health Authorities, was established in September to represent NHS organisations in England to EU decision makers, through monitoring and engaging with EU policy and legislative developments which have an impact on the NHS as a provider and commissioner of services, as an employer and as a business.

Board of Trustees and Directors' EU visit

On 10-11 September 2008, a group of NHS Confederation's Trustees and Directors travelled to Brussels to participate in a study visit and networking opportunity, hosted by the NHS European Office. The aim of the study visit was to give participants an introduction to EU affairs and the work of the NHS European Office, and an insight into European policy developments which may be particularly important for the NHS.

To coincide with the visit the NHS European Office held its launch reception in the European Parliament, on the evening of 10 September 2008. The event, which was hosted by a cross-party group of four UK Members of the European Parliament, gathered over 150 high-level participants from across the EU institutions and lobbying community.

The visit focussed on five major areas of EU policy impacting on the NHS: cross-border healthcare, patient safety, organ donation and transplantation, health and safety at work, and climate change. Speakers from the European Commission, the European Parliament, the UK Permanent Representation to the EU, and the European Hospital and Healthcare Federation welcomed the creation of the office and praised its work to date before presenting their views on the various policy areas under discussion. These were followed by question and answer sessions, enabling participants to engage in debate and to share their views on these developments.

The main outcome from the visit is an increasing awareness amongst NHS organisations of:

- the key role the NHS European Office plays in keeping the service abreast of EU developments which may significantly impact on NHS organisations
- the importance of NHS frontline expertise for the Office's credibility within the EU institutions and the unique added value we can offer in shaping EU policy
- the potential role of the Office in supporting the NHS regional innovation agenda promoted under Darzi, through linkages with the EU innovation agenda

Consultation on EU legal proposals on cross-border healthcare

In the summer the EU released legal proposals aiming to clarify the rights of patients to travel to other member states of the EU to receive medical treatment and the responsibilities of health systems to facilitate and fund this. The proposals will now go through a lengthy EU decision-making process before they become legislation and during this process the NHS European Office will seek to influence them in the interest of the NHS. In order to shape an NHS position to be promoted to EU decision-makers the Office has launched a consultation exercise, which has involved the organisation of a number of expert meetings, to discuss the potential implications of the proposals on the NHS.

The main issues that we will address in our lobbying campaign are:

- The importance of maintaining the NHS' ability to decide what care an individual patient is entitled to receive given his/her specific circumstances, and the decision-making processes used to do this;
- Consideration of when it might be appropriate to use prior authorisation systems for treatment abroad, and the benefits that such systems can offer to patients;
- The importance of ensuring that responsibility for issues such as quality and safety, and taking action when things go wrong, remains with the appropriate national authorities and there is no transfer of competence to the European courts.

Key forthcoming EU proposals

Several EU proposals of particular relevance to the NHS are expected in the next three months:

- **Pharmaceuticals** - The European Commission is due to publish a pharmaceuticals package in October, which will include proposals on information to patients, on counterfeit medicines and on the pharmaco-vigilance processes. The proposals on information to patients on prescription-only medicines are particularly relevant to the NHS in terms of the possible impact on patient demand for access to certain medicines.
- **Patient Safety** - we expect an EU recommendation on the prevention and control of HCAIs and a communication on patient safety in November. The aim of these initiatives is to propose measures to help prevent the spread of infections and to improve safety and quality of care throughout the EU. These are non-binding proposals but as there will be political pressure to implement the recommended actions it is important to ensure their consistency with action already ongoing in the UK in this area.
- **Workforce** - The EU will launch a consultation on health workforce in December. It will focus on the shortage of healthcare workers and ethical recruitment, the ageing population and health workforce, new technologies and

changing skill-mix needs and workforce planning. Working with NHS Employers, the NHS European Office will respond to the consultation, which will inform possible future EU actions in this area.

- **Organ donation** – We expect EU legal proposals on the quality and safety of transplant processes, with a view to ensuring consistently high standards throughout the EU, in November. The proposals will aim to introduce a common overarching framework to ensure quality and safety, with scope for each country to implement it as appropriate to their own systems.
- **Energy efficiency** – The EU is due to release proposals for the revision of EU legislation on energy performance of buildings shortly. This law requests minimum energy performance requirements and regular inspections of boilers and air conditioning systems to guarantee their energy efficiency. If the scope of the law is expanded, it could have a considerable impact on the NHS as a major energy consumer with a large infrastructure.

The NHS European Office has been working to assess the potential impact of these proposals on the NHS and to seek to influence them as appropriate. It will continue to engage with these proposals over the coming months.

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