

Meeting the challenge of chronic diseases: the role of patient empowerment and self-management

Devastating but manageable conditions

Chronic diseases are life-long conditions with a profound impact on the patient's health, well-being and life expectancy. The burden of chronic, non-communicable diseases (NCD) on societies and healthcare systems is without question one of the biggest challenges in the twenty-first century: NCD, like diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, cancer, mental health problems, chronic respiratory disease, and musculoskeletal conditions - caused 86% of all deaths and represented 77% of the disease burden in the WHO European Region¹ in 2005. Some of these disorders are largely preventable and are linked by common risk factors, like unhealthy lifestyle, underlying determinants and opportunities for intervention. A more equitable share of the benefits from effective behavioural interventions would bring significant added value for people with chronic conditions and healthcare systems of EU Member States.

In 2006, between one fifth and 40% of the EU population aged 15 years and over reported a long-standing health problem (TNS Opinion and Social 2007)

Empowering patients with self-management skills

However, many chronic conditions can be managed and their course can be positively influenced by people's behaviour. For example, people with diabetes can be empowered through education and training to be actively involved in the control of their blood glucose levels and to take action upon their test results by using self-monitoring devices. Also, the treatment of chronic kidney disease is planned by healthcare professionals and then discussed and agreed with the patient who carries out almost the entire treatment by him/herself. **There are many discussions worldwide as to how to determine the most effective way to deliver patient education. Behavioural changes must be implemented. To get there we must help people with chronic diseases to manage their condition in a better way and provide education, incentives and tools for self-management and care.**

By empowering people with a chronic disease to take responsibility for their condition, the burden of chronic NCD can be significantly reduced. National governments can help to protect the health of their citizens while at the same time controlling health spending, by integrating prevention and (self-) management into national health plans and chronic disease frameworks. These programmes should support and promote positive self-care behaviour as a key to delaying the onset of or even preventing complications that cost health systems millions in treatments.

Other relevant policy areas

Due to the increasing prevalence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease etc., as well as the high level of therewith related costs and the patients' needs for treatment, chronic diseases are relevant to a number of ongoing broader policy discussions at EU level, including proposals and discussions on NCD, transplantation and cross-border healthcare and – last but not least – the financial sustainability of healthcare systems.

The ELSC speakers call on the EU to:

- establish patient empowerment and self-management of chronic diseases as a priority of the new Commission's work programme and to position these topics at the centre of all relevant EU health policy initiatives.
- introduce EU-wide care models for chronic diseases that include behavioural and educational programmes which enable patients to take responsibility and manage their condition.
- ensure that core models and recommendations for Health Technology Assessments currently developed at EU level follow predictable, common criteria and methodologies which take into account the actual patient-self-management activity in the investigated treatment procedure.

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¹ **Gaining Health, WHO (2009)**