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EU's new health chief promises cross-border care proposal

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During her grilling by the European Parliament, Androula Vassiliou, the Cypriot woman selected to replace outgoing Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou, promised that a controversial proposal on cross-border health care would be put on the table in June.

Addressing patients' rights in cross-border health care, Vassiliou told a Parliament hearing 1 April that she was "convinced that no one is against improving legal clarity and transparency under the existing rights provided by the Treaty, or against improving access to health care".

While answering MEPs' questions, she expressed her determination to submit the proposal on access to cross-border health care for adoption by the Commission in June 2008. She revealed that the proposal would focus on patients' rights and increased access to health care. It will be part of a "social package" to be launched in cooperation with Social Affairs Commissioner Vladimír Špidla to promote access, opportunities and solidarity for all EU citizens, she explained.

Vassiliou said that she knows that some commissioners are sceptical" about the proposal, but expressed her desire to clarify confusion among those who think the issue revolves around services. "We are not talking about exchange of services or freedom of movement of services, this is about the rights of EU citizens and their right to have their health care in any part of the EU as the Treaty provides," she underlined.

Asked how the proposal has changed since the drafts seen by stakeholders just before Christmas, Vassiliou said the proposal would now include a kind of 'safety clause' to allow individual member states to take measures if the "export of patients" becomes excessive and damaging to national health systems. Specifically, a country could require patients to ask for prior authorisation before seeking care abroad.

"It is estimated that only 1% of patients leave their country for health care abroad. That is not an amount that will put national health systems in danger," she argued. In addition, she said, the ECJ decision clearly states that for non-hospital care, no prior authorisation is needed. As far as hospital care is concerned, "only if there is evidence that the national systems are going to be over-burdened or will suffer financial loss" can the country of origin can ask for prior authorisation, she said.

Regarding the other issues in her portfolio, Vassiliou promised to accelerate legislative progress on food additives and novel foods. She also promised new initiatives on rare diseases and cancer as well a continuation of efforts to fight smoking.

On GMOs, she said that some public health related arguments had been brought to her attention recently, and announced that she had determined to study them carefully before any further Commission action or decision on the matter is taken.

The nomination of Vassiliou as the successor to Markos Kyprianou, the previous health commissioner, was endorsed by the Commission in February. Following the 1 April hearing, Parliament will vote on the appointment of the commissioner-designate next week. Once appointed, the new commissioner will remain in office for 18 months, as the mandate of the Barroso Commission is set to end in autumn 2009.