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## **MEPs move towards cross-border health rules**

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS – MEPs in the European Parliament's health committee on Tuesday (31 March) voted to simplify rules on patients seeking medical treatment abroad.

Under the rules, patients who go to another member state for medical treatment do not need to get prior authorisation and will be re-imbursed to the extent that they would have been in their home country.

Patients may also seek hospital care in another member state and get the costs re-imbursed, but for this, member states can require prior authorisation.

Meanwhile, patients with rare diseases will be allowed to travel for treatment abroad even if the treatment is not covered by the home state, however, longterm care and organ transplants will not fall under the new rules.

MEPs also proposed establishing a European patient ombudsman to deal with complaints.

The committee's approval was welcomed by British Conservative MEP John Bowis, who steered the dossier through parliament.

"The current system has too often caused people unnecessary confusion at a particularly vulnerable time in their lives and it is essential that we provide greater clarity and legal certainty," he said.

"This directive will enable patients to seek treatment across the EU with a greater sense of confidence and certainty. It is particularly important that this system is not exclusive and bases a patient's right to treatment on their needs and not their means."

Dutch Liberal MEP Jules Maaten said: "People are sometimes afraid to get their medical treatment abroad. Different languages can make the communication more difficult. An ombudsman will guarantee patient's rights and make sure that complaints are dealt with in time and with care."

The EU was prompted to act in the area following several court judgments on patient mobility. The most recent one, from 2006, was a landmark judgment in the area, with the EU'S highest court ruling that a British national was entitled to claim money back from the British health service for treatment carried out in France.

**Still controversial**

The health law has been extremely controversial since the very beginning. It was originally included in a far-reaching services directive drawn up under the previous European Commission.

The law prompted outrage on the left - from the grassroots upwards - who felt making health an internal market issue would see a rush to the lowest common standard.

That law was eventually revised to exclude health care and the commission submitted a separate proposal on health last year.

It remains a topic of heated discussion however. Mr Bowis' report was subject to hundreds of amendments and Tuesday's committee vote saw an abstention by all Socialist MEPs.

The centre-left MEPs were protesting against the fact that the law's legal basis is article 95, which governs the smooth functioning of the internal market.

Socialists wanted it to be based on the public health article which says that health care is a national competence and that the European Union should improve health care for EU citizens as a whole.

The report now has to be passed by the full sitting of the house, with the vote due later this month and agreed by member states.