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Document :	AEMH 10-051
Title:	Health Ministers agree draft directive on crossborder healthcare
Author :	AEMH European Liaison Office
Purpose :	Information
Distribution :	AEMH Member Delegations
Date :	9 June 2010

EU health ministers back the Spanish proposal on patient mobility

08-06-2010

EFE

The EU's health ministers backed the Spanish proposal on patient mobility within the Union, at the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) held in Luxembourg this Tuesday.

In the public debate, the majority of the Member States approved the new draft directive on cross-border healthcare drawn up by the Spanish Presidency, which finds the middle ground between the interests of different countries and the initial proposal by the European Commission (EC).

Today's commitment represents an important step towards establishing a Community framework for patient rights, after the first legislative proposal was blocked at the end of 2009 by a group of countries led by Spain.

A "great political agreement"

This was how Spain's Health Minister Trinidad Jiménez described the approval of a draft EU directive on cross-border medical assistance, taking place on "a great day for the construction of a single healthcare zone in the EU". The new proposal, drawn up over the last four years, changes certain points that had caused disagreement among the 27 Member States. These notably included the definition of which countries should finance medical treatment received by their citizens in other Member States, conditions for accessing such services and quality and security requirements for patients.

The draft text establishes that as a general rule, the patient's country of residence shall pay the cost of his or her treatment. Nevertheless if the patient decides to return to his or her native country for treatment - or to the country where he or she is registered with the social security system - the latter will pay for treatment costs despite the citizen residing in another Member State.

The agreed text includes the need to have prior authorisation from the healthcare system of the country of residence for patients seeking certain types of medical assistance in a third country. These requirements, the minister said, are already in Regulation 883, in force since May. John Dalli, EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, stated that the text "will guarantee that European patients know their rights for receiving cross-border health care".

Although he said the EC "would have preferred a more innovative text," he said that the Community executive has accepted it "so the legislative process will progress".

Another subject discussed in the Council was the proposed regulation to guarantee legible labels on food products. It was agreed that letters should be no smaller than 1.2 millimetres.

Ministers also agreed to reduce salt intake by 16% over the next four years with the aim of reducing its impact on cardiovascular illnesses in the EU.