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Joint Statement of the European Medical Organisations on Patient Safety and Quality of Care in the Context of Economic Crisis

In periods of economic and social difficulties, there is a particular need to reinforce the availability of high quality medical care for every patient in Europe in order to safeguard adequate medical treatment also for those who can no longer afford it due to economic hardship. This is especially relevant in light of the burden of increasing “out of pocket” payments. Safeguarding access to medical care is also important for the maintenance of economic productivity of society in general. Certain groups, such as employees whose retirement age has been delayed by measures adopted in response to the crisis, deserve special attention to ensure their health and access to healthcare are protected.

The economic crisis induced some Member States to reduce resources available to their National Health Services by reductions of the public health budget, the number of hospital beds and employees, the salaries, and access to technologies. These measures aim to save public money, but paradoxically if the level of care is reduced, costs for treating the sick may increase. Where governments fail to invest in preventive or early interventions, increases in treatments of aggravated conditions are likely, typically entailing a higher cost both in terms of expenditure and human suffering.

On April 18 2012, the Commission adopted the Communication “Towards a job rich recovery” which sets out a range of measures to encourage employment and strengthen economic growth in Europe. It also identifies healthcare as one of three key sectors with a high employment potential.

The harsh reality of budget cuts however also affects practicing health professionals, who are often blamed for failures of the healthcare system and are not able to meet expectations of their patients. Instead of contributing to job rich recovery healthcare too can contribute to unemployment. Dismissals of medical professional staff will be very difficult to correct, particularly in view of trends in the European demography.

Shortages of staff and reduced funding already negatively affect quality of care and safety and will become even more significant in near future if proper remedies are not applied.

Maintaining an adequate supply and quality of healthcare services under severe budget constraints is thus a key issue to be addressed by policy makers.

The best way to optimise the efficiency of expenditure in health care is to assure a high quality of services. This requires appropriate structures and organization, as well as lawful working conditions for the health care workers. Quality is based on three points: structure, process and result. Quality of outcome therefore depends not only on professional qualifications, but equally on structure and process. If these are not adequate, even the highest level of professional competence cannot assure the quality of the system.

The undersigned European Medical Organisations believe that each European patient deserves and has the right to receive care of adequate standards, particularly in times of economic hardship and distress, and that inequality in access to healthcare has to be reduced. The tendency to reduce health expenditure only in order to maintain fiscal stability as seen in some countries is unacceptable.

The undersigned European Medical Organisations call upon European and national institutions to assure that every European patient receives the best possible healthcare and that the availability of healthcare professionals, hospital beds and healthcare structures, access to adequate technology and to medical services without undue delays are not allowed to deteriorate.

Patient safety and quality of care must not be compromised even in times of economic crisis.

The European Medical Organisations emphasise the importance of quality healthcare and declare the preparedness of the medical profession to support the European Commission in advocating adequate staffing ratios and sustainable requirements for structures and processes that are needed to assure the delivery of such care in the Member States.

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