



Event	Exchange of views with Patricia Hewitt in the ENVI Committee
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Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Health, United Kingdom, held a speech in the European Parliament in connection with the beginning of the UK Presidency. In her speech, which can be found at http://www.europarl.eu.int/comparl/envi/pdf/speeches/20050713/hewitt_en.pdf, she highlighted the Presidency's health priorities.

Mrs. Hewitt outlined the various legislative proposals which will be followed up during the UK Presidency, including:

- Nutrition and health claims
- Addition of vitamins, minerals and certain other substances to food
- Directive on Food Additives
- Regulation on Paediatric Medicines
- Health and Consumer Protection Programme
- Services Directive
- Working Time Directive

The Secretary of State then proceeded to explain the areas of Member State cooperation foreseen during the Presidency (i.e. work in the Council):

- The Platform for Action on Diet, Nutrition and Health and the expected Green Paper on Nutrition and Health
- Commission Green Paper on Mental Health

Mrs. Hewitt also explained the themes the Department of Health have chosen to focus on. These are:

- Patient Safety
- Tackling health inequalities

Mrs. Hewitt then welcomed questions from the floor and a number of MEPs responded.

Questions/comments were taken three at a time and the Secretary of State's response is therefore not always in the order the questions/comments were posed:

Mr. John Bowis:

- Concerned about the level of preparedness for events like bioterrorism.
- The European Centre for Disease Prevention: needs to be effective and have sufficient funds.
- Patient mobility: there is need for good guidance from the EU and to develop national guidelines.
- Food supplements: highlighted the recent European Court of Justice judgement on the issue.

Mrs. Edite Estrela:

- Inequalities: highlight the need to include gender inequalities

Mr. Georgs Andrejevs:

- Inequalities: highlight the inequalities between member states and that exchange of views and experiences between policy-makers and professionals is not enough. Call for a financial mechanism to overcome this inequality.

Mrs. Hewitt's response:

- Recognising that Member States have varying capacity to deal with disasters. Need to learn and establish mechanisms for sharing expertise and resources. Here the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) is very important. With respect to preparedness for a flu pandemic, the Presidency will cooperate with Member States and the WHO.
- Patient mobility: make reference to the Services Directive and how this is seen as not including health services. There is need for a separate legal proposal and there is an opportunity to discuss that at the informal Health Council in October.
- Food supplements: there is a need to study it more.
- Mental health: hope to have the green paper available for the December Health Council.
- Gender: seen as very important. Not only are 2 women killed every week in the UK as a result of domestic violence but there is also the significant problem of trafficking.
- Inequalities between Member States: recognises there are significant inequalities and encourages new Member States to take advantage of the rapidly advancing conditions.

Mrs. Caroline Lucas:

- Environmental causes of ill health: the importance of chemicals and REACH.
- Obesity: need for more action on the legislative front. Questioning the efficiency of self-regulation.
- Avian flu: there is a real risk of a pandemic.

Mr. Adamos Adamou:

- Cancer inequalities: he is himself an oncologist and has seen the problem of equal access to good treatment. Questioning the effectiveness of approaches based on mutual learning in improving this situation.

Mrs. Avril Doyle:

- Alcohol: the issue of binge drinking and what is done about it. The link between drinking, and road accidents and violence.
- Patient safety: the issue of MRSA.

Mrs. Hewitt's response:

- Environmental causes: knows REACH well from her previous position as Minister for Trade. The health cause is well understood but there needs to be a balance securing health and the environment without damaging the economy or imposing excessive costs.
- Obesity: an issue that will be worked on across the union. There is demand for information about the content of foods. There will be a meeting in September of the Platform on Diet, Nutrition and Activity. Aware of the social and economic inequalities related to obesity.
- Avian flu: there will be a Commission Communication in September and a meeting of medical professionals 22 September. In October there will be two simulation exercises (avian flu and smallpox). This is one step in the direction of exchange of information.
- Cancer: unequal access to treatment needs to be addressed through sharing of national expertise and learning. It is on the agenda for the health inequalities summit in October. There is a need to deal with prevention.
- Alcohol: will be dealt with at health inequalities summit as well.
- MRSA – European problem but with different patterns. Need to learn from each other and share best practice.

Mr. Chris Davies:

- Drugs: legal drugs like smoke kill 500 000 a year. Illegal drugs are widely available and there is a large number of traffickers. Which way will policy go?

Mrs. Françoise Grossetete:

- Paediatric care: there is a need for better education amongst parents not to shake them etc. so that the number of children traumatised will decrease.
- Elderly: see ageing of the European population as an opportunity. Need to start something now so that member states can be prepared and can tackle it in good time.

Mrs. Christa Klass:

- Allergenic substances: include sulphides on wine labels.

- Nutrition and health claims: highlight the controversy around article 4 and nutrient profiles.
- Obesity: need education at home and in schools to help tackle the problem.

Mrs. Hewitt's response:

- Tobacco: much effort has been made. Illegal drugs is a home affairs problem and there is not much enthusiasm to deal with it among health ministers at the EU level.
- Paediatric medicines: hope to move rapidly on the legislation. Agree that there is need to educate parents so they do not hurt their children.
- Ageing: agree it is an opportunity. Need to look at how we can improve health promotion and how to manage long term conditions, e.g. obesity.
- Nutrient profiling: strong support for Article 4 in the Council because 1) the danger of misleading consumers and 2) consumers want better information about what they buy.

Mr. Marios Matsakis:

- Inequalities in health care: women live 5 years longer than men.
- Crises: assessment of hospitals and medical facilities to see if they can cope with crises. Issue recommendations?
- Alcohol: will the minister put up a fight with the industry? Ban advertisement? Issue alcohol warnings?
- Patient safety: there is a difference in how systems deal with negligence. Doctors are organised but patients are not. There is a need for a patient legal assistance agency.

Mrs. Mary Honeyball:

- Has the minister any intention of bringing different committees together to get cross-cutting and joined-up government?

Mr. Vittorio Prodi:

- Immune systems: the change in peoples' immune systems need to be looked at.
- Lifestyles: why do young people not care about life?

Mrs. Hewitt's response:

- Gender inequalities: there is a need to look in both directions and consider both men and women.
- Crises: in preparing for crisis management member states increase their ability to respond.
- Alcohol: decreasing abuse and harm includes voluntary action.
- Patient safety: important issues to address.
- Cooperation: the minister seeks to bring together other colleagues to tackle different issues.
- Immune systems: member states and professionals need to seek and share best practice.
- Lifestyles: young people need help to find motivation.