

European Voice

AN INDEPENDENT VIEW OF THE EU

1 - 7 July 2004 Volume 10 number 24

www.europeanvoice.com

Survey shows citizens would travel for health care

NEARLY two-thirds of Europeans would travel to another country for treatment if their own health system were prepared to pay the bill, a survey published this week suggests.

Among young people, this readiness to travel rises to 76%. Older patients in France and Germany were the only groups reluctant to cross borders for health care, according to a study of 8,000 patients in eight EU states: the Czech Republic, France, Germany, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.

The study was commissioned by the Stockholm Network, a group of free-market think-tanks, and carried out by Populus. Helen Disney, director of the network, said the results showed the potential popularity of "health tourism", where people travel from one country to another for treatment, and the significance of a 1998 European Court

of Justice (ECJ) ruling that gave two patients the right to claim reimbursement from their national systems for treatment they had received in another member state.

Disney said: "Whether we like it or not, Europe's health systems are no longer sustainable and will have to be overhauled. This study shows that Europeans not only realize this but are becoming impatient for change."

Tamsin Rose, general secretary of the European Public Health Alliance, which represents 93 non-profit making health NGOs, challenged the findings. She said that most people would be reluctant to travel abroad for treatment: "It may be OK for younger people and for routine operations and cosmetic surgery but for patients with chronic disorders it isn't a realistic option."

The European Commission, while

recognizing that health care is the responsibility of national governments, has been pressing to give citizens more information as to how to obtain treatment across borders.

But Chas Seadon, chief executive of European Medical Care, a company bringing patients to Belgium for treatment, said cross-border treatments would remain largely privately funded until governments were held to have a duty of care.

Rulings from the ECJ in favour of cross-border treatment were based on what constituted a reasonable waiting time, he said, which national health services could easily evade. European Medical Care brought 300 people over to Belgium in its first year and was now on course for 500-600 in its second year. Most patients were from the UK, though others were from Russia, the Gulf or the United States, he said.