

Politicians Should Care about their Voters' Health

From the desk of [Chresten Anderson](#) on Thu, 2006-09-07 21:15

A [recent survey](#) from IAPO (the International Alliance of Patients' Organizations) clearly states that patients want the right to better healthcare information. IAPO is the global alliance representing patients of all nationalities across all disease areas, and includes input from ten EU member states. The survey highlights the need for more patient-centered healthcare with timely access to the best treatments and information on treatment options. The implications of the study for Europe are clear. In 1992 the European Union passed a directive prohibiting pharmaceutical companies from advertising their products. This ban is an attempt to keep healthcare costs in Europe down by securing lower living standards and less informed patients.

Nevertheless, the governments of Europe have to deal with the [failure of the public healthcare systems](#), healthcare systems that are [too costly and too inefficient](#) – in short they make no economic sense. And as the IAPO study (as well as [a survey of the Stockholm Network](#)) shows – patients are not happy with the European healthcare systems. Unfortunately, cost containment is a primary goal of all governments – and a politically convenient place to reduce costs is in the area of pharmaceuticals, even though the savings are only visible in the short-term, while the same policy merely serves to put extra pressure on the healthcare system over time. One can only expect that better informed patients will identify and cure illnesses in time, leading to fewer hospitalizations. However the only way to secure the much needed funds to inform patients is to allow the producers of the products to tell the users about them.

One can only draw the same conclusions from the IAPO study, which includes an analysis of the quality of healthcare and identifies the major challenges for improvements in government healthcare policies. The patient organizations agree on three needs:

- * timely access to the best treatments and information;
- * the right to participate in decisions at the individual patient level
- * patient involvement in policy-making.

It is especially important to ensure a shift in Europe towards a more patient-centered approach to healthcare. The government healthcare systems in Europe have made patients into clients rather than partners, when it comes to treating their diseases – and after all, the person most interested in receiving proper treatment is the patient. The patient-centered approach should aim to integrate the needs and expectations of patients into Europe's healthcare systems with a special focus on improving patients' access to treatment and information. A more patient-centered healthcare system where patients are empowered requires more efficient communication on disease and treatment options to the patients themselves. That is the basic conclusion that can be drawn from the IAPO study – and one which all European politicians should support – after all, also their voters' health is at stake.