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Warning: new directive may seriously damage your healthcare

Cross-border healthcare

Today, the European Parliament voted (1) on a new cross-border healthcare directive, which has the stated aim of providing legal clarity to European patients who wish to receive treatment in another Member State. Greens voted against because of the lack of legal base beyond "internal market" (risking a neoliberal free market view of healthcare), a lack of legal clarity on 'prior authorisation' and their wish to have specific legislation to address rare diseases.

After the vote, **Margrete Auken** (Denmark) one of Greens/EFA shadow draftspersons, commented:

"We are of course very much in favour of defending patients' rights but this directive offers precious little towards that goal. It risks putting medical tourism before universal access to quality domestic healthcare. We must not jeopardise the rights of the huge majority of Europeans who prefer to receive good quality healthcare close to their homes. How are the hospitals supposed to maintain and plan their surgery and other vital treatments if the patients have almost rein to go abroad for hospital treatment and get reimbursed for it? This system risks benefitting only a small number of well-off patients who can shop around for treatments, at the expense of a large majority who may experience deteriorating quality of their hospitals."

Jean Lambert (UK) who worked on the file in the European Parliament employment committee, added:

"If a patient wants to get reimbursed for going abroad to receive hospital treatment, we think it's fair that the Member States should first give its authorisation. That would allow the patient peace of mind when going abroad and allow Member States to maintain some control on the outflow of patients. That is why we have worked very hard to ensure that Member States can set up a prior authorisation system to ensure that their healthcare system does not get undermined. We have to bear in mind that the EU treaty states that Member States can plan their own healthcare system and we are coming dangerously close to eroding that right."

Further information:

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Claude Turmes (Luxembourg) who was shadow rapporteur for the Greens in the environment and public health committee, commented:

"We have to remember that European citizens already have good opportunities to go abroad and get reimbursed for the treatment under the existing regulation on the coordination of social security systems. If you are for instance on a waiting list and urgently need treatment, the existing regulation already grants you the right to full reimbursement. In light of the limitations on Member States to require prior authorisation for hospital treatment abroad, it is hard to see the intention behind this new directive as anything other than an attempt to liberalise healthcare in Europe. We managed to minimise the damage in today's vote but the text of the directive still says loud and clear that Treaty article on the "internal market" provides the legal basis. That is a something I seriously hope the Council will correct in the upcoming negotiations."

Notes to editors:

297 votes in favour, 120 against, 152 abstentions