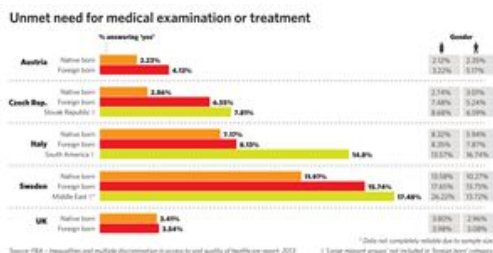


Too poor to be treated?

By Cynthia Kroet - Today, 03:50 CET

There are huge gaps between member states when it comes to healthcare provision.



In the European Union, one of the most important determinants of an individual's access to healthcare is what country he or she lives in. The EU's treaty sets out that: "Union action shall

respect the responsibilities of the member states for the definition of their health policy and for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care."

The treaty does give the EU a role in public health. It requires that: "A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities."

And it dictates that: "Union action, which shall complement national policies, shall be directed towards improving public health, preventing physical and mental illness and diseases, and obviating sources of danger to physical and mental health."

But while the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights states that "everyone has the right of access to preventive healthcare and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices", what matters most are those national conditions: a member state's definition of its health policy and the organisation and delivery of services and care.

Although European member states have, by global standards, well-developed healthcare systems, equality of access for all is still far from reality. In practice there are considerable variations in care between member states and within each member state.

The World Health Organization Europe (WHO) is mapping out groups that are excluded from, or lack sufficient access to, medical treatment. This exclusion is usually determined by social and economic circumstances such as income and living conditions.

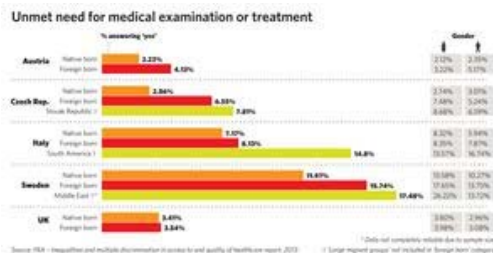
National policies on public funding for healthcare, or reimbursement or the funding of specific therapies or technologies also determine access to care. Nicola Bedlington, director at European Patients Forum (EPF) – a Europe-wide federation of patients' groups, which seeks to represent patients' interests across member states – says: "There is a huge gap between member states and it is even deepening because of the economic crisis."

Across the EU, financing demands for healthcare are rising faster than economic growth. The net effect is that healthcare becomes less accessible. A WHO Europe survey shows that in the EU about 30% of citizens say it is more difficult to bear the costs of general healthcare than before the crisis.

The EU is striving to reduce inequalities and inconsistencies. Its health programme for the spending period 2014-20 has as one of its main aims reducing discrimination in healthcare.

Tonio Borg, the European commissioner for health, has promised that this programme should be able to "improve people's access to medical expertise and information for specific conditions, and improve healthcare quality and patient safety".

One of the more specific elements in the new programme is improving health literacy, by which the EU means the ability to get information understood by appropriate audiences. "In the end, access is all about



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information and education. If patients are not aware of their rights and possibilities it could have a serious impact on their health," says Bedlington.

She says there are sub-categories of patients that might find it increasingly difficult to get access to medical treatment. "Healthcare professionals could think it is not worthwhile any more to invest in old patients, for example." She cites as an example attitudes to depression, which has been seen as a condition of old age.

Patients that experience rare diseases may also encounter difficulties in getting access to healthcare services. An estimated 27 to 36 million Europeans suffer from such a disease, so the EU is supporting research to improve diagnoses and treatments.

According to Serge Bernasconi, chief executive officer at Eucomed – an organisation that represents the medical technology industry in Europe – the industry is trying to offer solutions: "We develop new technologies – such as medical devices and in vitro diagnostics – that are more value-based and that meet the needs of patients."

But Bernasconi is not optimistic about the impact of the economic and financial crisis on the health sector: "When it comes to healthcare sustainability, we don't think the old days of virtually no restrictions on healthcare budgets will ever come back."

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