

EUROPEAN UNION

Immigration could strain EU health services

Physicians and politicians are warning that the new European Union membership of former East Bloc countries with high rates of infectious diseases could strain the continent's public health resources.

In May, 10 countries, many of them former Communist states, joined the EU, sparking an intense debate over the prospect of increased demand for health services across the continent.

Under the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, adopted in 2002, all patients have the right to treatment in any member state. A series of European Court of Justice rulings have also confirmed that patients having trouble receiving care in their home country may seek treatment in another EU state. Their home government is required to reimburse the costs.

As of June 1, a new European health insurance card also made it easier for EU citizens to access care while they are travelling or working temporarily in another EU country.

These rights mean patients

may seek treatment outside their country's borders.

Improving the health status of former Soviet bloc countries will be a "major challenge," warned David Byrne, the European commissioner for health and consumer protection.

"With EU enlargement, our borders will shift to the East," Byrne said. "Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and others will soon be on our doorstep and will require even greater attention. We need to persuade our partners that preventing HIV/AIDS is just as vital to their future economic well-being as roads or power stations."

Doctors from the European Centre on Health Societies in Transition and the Imperial College London joined the warning chorus in April (*Lancet* 2004;363:1389-92), stating that "public health systems, rooted in Soviet traditions, are struggling to respond effectively" to diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV.

Epidemics have been reported in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus — countries that now border the

EU. In the paper, the doctors say movement within the EU raises questions about the possible spread of those diseases.

In Western Europe, widespread concern has centred around the prospect of this potential surge in immigration. In the UK, the lobby group Immigration Watch claims between 40 000 and 50 000 workers will move to the UK from the East each year, in part because of better quality health care. Official predictions put the likely immigration rate closer to 10 000 per year.

In Eastern Europe, medical associations are worried higher wages in the West will prompt the mass emigration of doctors. [See adjacent article on the Czech Republic.]

Aware of the widespread confusion around patients' rights that these debates have stimulated, the EU Commission has established a high-level group of senior health officials from the member states to improve cooperation around the issue. — *Colin Meek*, Wester Ross, Scotland

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HUMAN RESOURCES

Czech Republic fears EU membership will lure doctors

The Czech Republic's health insurance system is braced for an onslaught of new claims following the Eastern European country's entrance into the European Union in May.

Generally regarded as practising the highest standard of medical care in the former Eastern bloc, the Czech Republic is expected to be a mecca for patients from EU countries seeking better quality treatment than they can get at home.

"Middle class Russians or Arabs who want good care but can't afford the Mayo Clinic might ... [already] come to the Czech Republic," says Pavel Hrobon, a Czech physician and health administrator.

In addition, there will be a shift in the physician workforce. Czech doctors' earn about 35 000 crowns a month (Can\$1785) — a quarter of the average income for physicians in neighbouring Germany. Hrobon predicts that 5% of doctors will seek work elsewhere. But David Rath, head of the Czech Chamber of Doctors, estimates the exodus will reach 30%.

Dr. Pavel Machac, an anesthesiologist at Prague's Nemocnice Hospital, says he is among those who will head West. "Here you are forced to work massive overtime even though it is against EU rules," says Machac. "I want to be in a



Dinah Spitzer

Open doors: Czech medical facilities may be inundated with patients from new EU members.

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