

EUROPEAN HOSPITAL

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highlights!

EUROPEAN FORUM FOR THOSE IN THE BUSINESS OF MAKING HEALTHCARE WORK



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Molecular and genetic sequencing diagnostics are moving on

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Global shortages - then what makes Spain so different?



Organ donation A business based on good faith?

Rumour had it for a while, and many found out when the bomb was finally dropped at, of all places, the Congress of the International Transplantation Society, held in Berlin this July - the waiting list for donor organs in the database of the Eurotransplant Foundation had been manipulated.

Report: Anja Behringer

A transplant surgeon at the University Hospital Göttingen in Germany had forged dialysis and examination results to give a number of his patients - currently around 25 - improved slots on the waiting list and thus increase the number of his operations. Why? Transplant surgeons' salaries were then volume based, which in future will not be the case. However, in the country's largest transplant clinic at Hanover Medical School (MHH), a press officer stated that such performance-related contracts for doctors never existed at their clinic. So was this a systems error only in Göttingen; an individual single case in Europe? All hospitals have their own safeguards against manipulations, but when it comes to the assessment of patients to determine the urgency of transplantations, many doctors still advocate a 'Four Eyes Principle', i.e. diagnosis made by two doctors - which obviously requires more resources.

So far, there has been no proof of any financial damage or kickbacks; however, the Public Prosecutor's Office is investigating whether charges can be brought for involuntary manslaughter and also whether other doctors were involved in manipulation. Could this, therefore, be just the tip of the iceberg? Notwithstanding, the breach of trust, particularly among the most severely ill patients, will be almost impossible to atone for - and this also goes for the millions of potential organ donors whose ethical and psychological concerns about the donation of their own body parts the Government had been trying to allay with an amendment to the law.

In June, the majority in the Federal German Council (Bundesrat) decided that, in future, from the age of 16 everyone with medical insurance should be regularly consulted as to whether they would donate their organs after their death. This solution is to be part of the new transplant law.

Different rules apply in other European countries, and the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions and models remain controversial. However, across the board

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France: Almost 30% of medical acts are unjustified

A recent poll of more than 800 hospital and private doctors reveals that only 72% of medical acts are fully justified.

Report: Annick Chapoy

Conclusions from a new poll that indicates almost 30% of medical acts in France are unjustified, also shows that most of the practitioners are willing to open a debate on this matter. The survey, carried out by the FHF (Fédération Hospitalière de France) - which regroups the vast majority of public hospitals - also shows that those interviewed largely agree that the high proportion of pointless medical acts can be linked to doctor-patient relationships, with patients tending to interact significantly in the prescription of medical treatments.

79% of doctors think that patients' expectations have increased, especially in terms of information. Moreover, 53% of them reported that the potential risk of legal action has led them

to modify their practice, driving them to prescribe superfluous tests. That's a positive reason to make patients actors in the health system instead of just healthcare consumers. An effort is needed to educate patients and inform them on their duties as well as their rights, the FHF explains, pointing to the example of a very successful media campaign launched a few years ago: 'les antibiotiques, c'est pas automatique!' (Antibiotics, it's not automatic).

The FHF also advocates the idea of publishing frames of reference: scientific authorities would publish the list of tests that are strictly necessary for such and such cases. Additional tests would not qualify for reimbursement by the social security system, and their absence could not be considered a deciding argument against

the practitioner in the case of a legal action. The low number of existing frames of reference is actually mentioned by medical practitioners to explain the fact that they sometimes prescribe unnecessary tests.

The FHF has already suggested the setting-up of a 'patient's institute', which would provide a sort of continuing education. One concern of the FHF has been the avoidance of unaffordable waste. After a long study, in 2010 the FHF published the number of questionable medical acts performed each year that cost millions of euros: biological tests, X-rays, unjustified caesareans, screening elderly patients for prostate cancers, etc. Changing habits will take time, but the FHF is confident it will win that fight. The organisation is proud of some initial achievements:

the number of caesareans greatly diminished after it publicised the gap between the number of caesareans performed without apparent need in public hospitals and private clinics, with comparative figures from region to region. The number of head X-rays, unnecessary in the case of a simple trauma for which a clinical examination is considered sufficient according to scientific consensus, dropped 9% in the months following FHF's explanations in the media.

According to Frédéric Valletoux, President of the FHF, public hospitals hold a real legitimacy in the matter: some subjects are to be faced head on, such as the closing down of small hospitals where safety is not guaranteed - because the FHF does not have an approach based on commercialism. Hospital doctors are not paid according to the number of their medical acts, even if public hospital budgets are based on the volume of medical acts performed.

Between the lines, the FHF appears to be blaming the Health Insurance (Assurance Maladie) that holds the record of acts performed by every physician, keeping them to itself in order to avoid a possible wind of protest among private practitioners. Yet, the FHF would not favour disciplinary actions against doctors who prescribe unnecessary acts. It claims that the priority is to continue to promote information and make that public. According to Frédéric Valletoux, we cannot imagine that the 28% of acts that doctors themselves consider pointless could all disappear. Medical practice should in no way become cold and mechanical; it must remain basically humane. To reach an adequate relevance of medical acts will be a long process and will need strong political impetus - in fact, the FHF has already appealed to the new Health Minister, Marisol Touraine. Notwithstanding, the system of

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