

Ageing Population: how to escape the cost trap?

Focusing on patients, measuring health outcomes



Recent data show that 16% of the European population is over the age of 65 years, which is a testament to innovations in medicines, access to and quality of treatment and overall lifestyle improvements. However, if fertility rates stay the same, the number of elderly people in the EU will double by 2050, which will put pressure on sectors of society – including healthcare. While some warn of an impending crisis as a result of an aging population, according to Vladimír Špidla, EU Commissioner for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities, “All the rhetoric of catastrophe often obscures the fact that demographic ageing is actually a success story.”

Yet, with this changing population, it is critical that governments, industry, health insurance providers and healthcare professionals work together to rethink the overall approach to healthcare delivery and devise comprehensive solutions to effectively and holistically manage costs. Focusing on increasing the efficiency of the healthcare system, measuring health outcomes, and understanding what truly works can help ensure ongoing access, meaningful patient care and value in the long-term.

In the current climate of economic recession, those supporting the elderly are concerned about cuts in health spending. Indeed, a 2006 report from the Economic Policy Committee, which advises the European Commission and the Member States, said public spending on healthcare was projected to rise by 1.5% of GDP by 2050. “We’re not saying that govern-

ments should necessarily spend more but that they should spend their limited resources more wisely,” said Anne-Sophie Parent, director of AGE, the European Older People’s Platform.

Elizabeth Teisberg, associate professor at Virginia University and co-author of the book: *Redefining Healthcare*, told a recent conference in Brussels: “The real question is how do we create healthcare systems that drive improvements in value and increase value for patients? Europe is ahead in terms of universal coverage, which is essential for equity and efficiency. But it is not enough.”

Focusing on the patient, rather than just on delivery or the cycle of care, and ensuring that clinical teams exchange information and not just results, are ways to overcome the organisational obstacles, she said.

Health outcomes are also a key issue. “We need to understand what works, when it works and how it works,” Teisberg said. “The required measurement of outcomes is one of the most effective things that governments can do.”

Measuring results rather than assessing standards based on current systems is a way of addressing rises in healthcare costs, Teisberg remarked. “If you measure results, you unmask disparities, which most people will find intolerable,” she said. “If we create standards about inputs to care based on current systems, we lock ourselves into the current cost escalation that we are facing.”