The European Board Examination in Neurology

The first European Board Examination in Neurology was held at the congress of the European Neurologic Society (ENS) in Milan on 19th June 2009. Six candidates from different European countries sat the examination and passed it successfully. The EBN Board Examination in Neurology, whose establishment was decided in 2006, follows the UEMS recommendation and trend to establish Board certifications for all medical fields.

Ministers reject proposal on cross-border care

When meeting in Brussels last week, the EU Health Ministers failed to reach an agreement on the draft directive on patient’s rights in cross-border healthcare. A blocking minority of countries refused to go ahead on the basis of the compromise text proposed by the Swedish Presidency.

The European Commission said it may now abandon the proposal, leaving the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to decide when patients are entitled to be reimbursed for healthcare treatment in another EU country. Another option would be for the Commission and/or the forthcoming Spanish Presidency to take the initiative again and work on a revision of the proposal.

Up to now, there are no concrete indication what the future of the proposal will be further to the outcome of the EU Council Meeting.

However, the UEMS is confident that this issue will be addressed in the near future and invites the Commission and the Member States to seriously consider the opportunity arising from this failure to re-examine the text in a way that will benefit quality, continuity and safety of patient healthcare provided in Europe. Members of UEMS are also invited to continue to lobby their national governments in that direction as well.

This is a sad moment for patients. They are the main losers today. A golden opportunity has been missed to reinforce their rights to seek treatment in another Member State and to be reimbursed.

Androula Vassiliou
European Commissioner for Health

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The UEMS/EBN is not an instrument of legal qualification but is entitled to demonstrate a sign of excellence. It is hoped that the board exam will help to raise the standard in neurology. Also the approach of the UEMS/EBN could be used by the national societies as part of their national exam or could potentially replace the national exams. The examination was opened to candidates (at the moment EU nationals only) either certified by their national society or at the stage of training (residency) where they would be admitted for their national training certification. Its form is a multiple choice test and it also includes a structured oral case presentation. The scientific committees of the ENS (European Neurology Society based on individual membership) and of the EFNS (European Federation of Neurological Societies based on national memberships) helped to develop the questions and cases.

The examination committee

The examination committee consists of 4 members the UEMS/EBN, 2 members of the ENS and 2 members of the EFNS. The president of the UEMS and the chairman of the examination committee chair it.

Evaluation and Future Development

During the preparation and during the course of the examination many comments and suggestions were made by the examination committee and also by the candidates. Also a written evaluation of the examination by the candidates was carried out. In addition to these personal impressions, the department of medical education will evaluate the MCQ answers, in regard to the number of correct responses, or blank responses to each question. This will possibly give clues to the different levels of difficulties of questions, and might also detect other “hidden” problems.

Financial Background

The individual price for the examination was €600. Despite the voluntary work of the scientific committees and all persons involved in the process, except the professional society management (Vienna medical office VMA) the costs for the development of the first examination were around €50 000. In the near future, the interest and the number of applicants will decide whether this effort will be sustainable.

For more information, contact the UEMS/EBN President Wolfgang Grisold: wolfgang.grisold@wienkav.at

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Mental Health and Well-Being

The European Pact on Mental Health, which was launched in June 2008, comprises five key elements:

• Mental Health in Youth and Education
• Prevention of Depression and Suicide
• Mental Health in Older People
• Mental Health in Workplace Settings
• Combating Stigma and Social Exclusion.

Four meetings based on the successive priorities have been held so far by the Commission and the EU Council Presidencies and/or the EU Member States. The 5th meeting will take place in Lisbon during the 2nd Semester 2010. Other events are also being organised under the EU Pact on Mental Health, amongst which the meeting: “Mental Health and Well-being at the Work place”. On this occasion, the EU Commission created a database infrastructure to allow EU Member-States, regional authorities and NGOs to share good practices in mental health action. The EU Commission is calling stakeholders to take part in the database by completing a template form. This will allow the EU Commission to introduce actions and/or policies to the database. The resources that will be considered as ‘good practice’ will be available on the Commission’s Health Directorate-General and will be placed under the 5 sections mentioned previously.

A Thematic Conference on “Prevention of Depression and Suicide in a time of Crisis: Making it Happen” will be also held in Budapest, on 10th and 11th December.

To add policy description or good practice for Mental Health in Children and Young People or for the Prevention of Depression and Suicide:

Another thematic conference on: “Mental health in Youth and Education”, organised by the European Commission and Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs under the auspices of the Swedish Presidency, took place in Stockholm on 29th and 30th October. The event’s objective was to highlight the importance of promoting mental health and well-being, exchange good practices between stakeholders as well as to adopt an implementation framework for the Mental Health Pact. Five main topics were addressed: Parents, family and the early years, the role of health services in promotion and prevention, the community environment, the role of media, internet and electronic games, and educational settings and learning.

More information on the event is available here: http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/ev_20090929_en.htm
HEALTHCARE — CALLS FOR INFORMATION

SAFETY OF REPROCESSED SINGLE-USE MEDICAL DEVICES

The EU Commission launched a public consultation on the reprocessing of medical devices. Based on Directive 2007/47/EC, the European Union would like to get information about the diverse policies in its Member-States on this issue and find out which option would suit best at the EU level. Interest parties are invited to provide documented evidence for cases where the use of reprocessed medical devices intended for single use has caused physical injury to the patient and/or documented evidence for cases where the use of reprocessed medical devices intended for single use has transmitted infections/cross contamination. The deadline for submission is 15th December 2009.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE REPROCESSED SINGLE-USE MEDICAL DEVICES.

MERCURY SPHYGOMANOMETERS IN HEALTHCARE AND ALTERNATIVES

The EU Commission has planned to review the issue of reliable safer alternatives for mercury containing sphygmomanometers and other measuring devices by the end of autumn 2009. This follows a request from the European Parliament and the EU Council within the framework of Directive 2007/51/EC. The Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks adopted an opinion on this matter, as requested by the EU Commission, in September 2009. The SCENIHR wondered whether the replacement of mercury-containing blood pressure measuring devices would endanger healthcare and compromise long-term epidemiological studies for public health. The Scientific Committee concludes that mercury sphygmomanometers should remain available as a reference standard for clinical validation of existing and future mercury-free blood pressure measurement devices until an alternative device is developed and recognised as such.

THE OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR BLOOD DONORS

The EU Commission asked the Regulatory Committee on Quality and Safety of Blood to give an opinion on the draft EU Commission directive that allows temporary derogation from certain eligibility criteria of blood donors in the context of the influenza A pandemic (Directive 2009/135/EC) supported by a risk assessment run by the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC). The Blood Regulatory Committee approved the text despite some reservation expressed by the German and Austrian representatives concerning the proposition that EU Member-States should draw a correlation table between their laws, regulations and administrative provisions and the proposed directive.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

EC STAFF WORKING PAPER ON TELEMEDICINE

The EU Commission’s DG Information Society and Media published a working Paper on Telemedicine.

The lack of legal clarity is seen as one of the causes for the limited use of this technical innovation. Indeed, the norms and rules that currently apply to telemedicine are not widely known by the stakeholders. To remedy this situation, the EU Commission will release in 2010 a Staff Working Paper on Community legal framework applicable to telemedicine.

During the consultations with the stakeholders on the subject of telemedicine, several legal issues have been identified. These include: licensing, accreditation and registration of health professionals providing telemedicine services; reimbursement of costs for telemedicine services; liability; personal data protection and conflict of jurisdictions. The present EC initiative will provide guidance for telemedicine users on the Community legal framework applicable to these areas.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.

E-HEALTH

The Medica 2009 exhibition held in Dusseldorf focused on the benefits of eHealth technologies. Amongst others, the Deutsche Welle (DW) reported about innovative eHealth solutions from the MyHeart project.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.
Third participation of DG SANCO in the Open Days

The 7th edition of the Open Days, jointly organised by the EU Committee of the Regions and the European Commission’s DG for Regional Policy, was organised from 5th to 8th October 2009. This year’s edition focused on “Global challenges, European responses”.

When opening the session “Together for achieving Sustainable Healthcare”, the EU Commissioner for Health Androula Vassiliou highlighted EU approach towards the pandemic; as well as the protection of citizens against health threats and the assistance to health systems in Member States, as well as the development of new technologies. According to Ms Vassiliou, regional and local authorities have an active role to play in these fields as they set up services that fit local needs. The Commissioner also insisted that this is the first time that health is now an eligible area for EU cohesion funding under the financial framework 2007-2013 and made reference to the Green paper on the EU Workforce for Health adopted on 10th December 2008.

EU Risk Assessment Scientists

The Chairs of the EU Scientific Committees and Panels involved in risk assessment met in Brussels in November for their fifth annual meeting. This year’s meeting was organised by the European Commission’s Health and Consumers Directorate General and was focused on two new subjects: synthetic biology and the next generations of nanotechnologies. These meetings are entitled to share experiences and best practice, as well as to review activities of common interest. Through the coordination of national actions, it is believed that the quality of risk assessment will be enhanced.

For further details.

Pandemic preparedness

In October 2009, the European Council adopted several conclusions on Influenza, following the WHO’s advice last June, in order to prepare for a new wave of the pandemic.

Amongst others, it agreed that a few key issues should be part of a coordinated EU approach towards the pandemic; namely on the availability of vaccines for all, on a vaccination strategy, on the need for regulatory procedures, for information to the public and for global cooperation, as well as on the Member States’ will to work together on multi-sectoral coordination at many different levels. The EU Council also gave advice to the European Commission and to the Member States.

For further details.

EU Health Journalism Prize

Three authors won the first EU health prize for journalists. Funded under the Second Community Health Programme 2008-2013, this prize aims to make award to articles that allow citizens to understand better health issues. The French Journalist Estelle Saget, author of the article “Schizophrenia explained to family and friends” for ‘Express’ won the first prize. The second place was given to a Lithuanian journalist, Audré Šrėbaliené, for his article ‘Ekstra’ on donating bone marrow, and a Romanian journalist, Emilia Chiscop, author of ‘Ziarul de Iasi’, was given the third prize for her article on a young doctor coping with schizophrenia.

For further details.

French Medical Demography Atlas

The French Conseil National de l’Ordre National des Médecins (CNOM- French National Council of Medical Regulatory Authorities) has released its annual National Demography Atlas, based on data from the French medical regulatory authority. This statistical work summarizes the medical demography in France as it stands for 1st January 2009 and is divided into two parts. Whilst the former is an assessment of the demography of doctors from within and outside the European Union, the latter is a detailed analysis of the medical and surgical specialties - 49 in total - designed to inform the atlas user on the statistics within each specialty.

For further details.

If you would like to contribute to this Newsletter, please contact the UEMS Secretariat.
EVENT REPORTS

“Towards a Healthier Europe?”

The UEMS attended this event hosted by Ms Françoise Grossetête MEP, which gathered a certain number of representatives from healthcare stakeholders, industry and decision-makers to discuss among other issues the fight against counterfeit medicines.

“The objective is to harmonise current practices and ensure all EU citizens have equal access to reliable and quality information on existing medicines.”

Françoise Grossetête — Member of the European Parliament

As a whole, a general dissatisfaction was expressed from stakeholders and the industry towards the European Commission’s pharmaceutical package (See UEMS 2009/06). Efforts from the EU to fight and prevent the proliferation of counterfeit medicines were seen as unsatisfactory. What is said to be lacking is the political will to stop these medicines, not the technological means. Stakeholders, including the industry, also argued in favour of better prevention and access to medicines, which could only be achieved through greater collaboration between the interested parties.

One of the speakers addressed the issue of support to innovation: if the EU wants to become a “knowledge based economy”, a new approach was said to be needed, and this would only happen if politics support medical innovation. Françoise Grossetête MEP pointed to the issues of equal access and improved public health. According to her, the EU could not be dependent on research outside the EU. Whilst she made clear that she did not support the industry per se, she was clearly in favour of research and innovation. Similarly, she criticized the Pharmaceutical Package, particularly for its slowness with which it was dealt with. Besides, the issue of costs was another problem mentioned by F.Grossetête. Due to the development of new illnesses as well as the mutation of viruses, the financing by national governments of research and prevention was seen as the only way to tackle those issues, albeit its indirect affect.

Two other MEPs present Nessa Childers and Holger Krahmer agreed concerning the necessity for innovation and the transparency to patients. They insisted that the industry, the patients and the EU should find a compromise together. In their view, an “integrated risk management approach” should be taken up, insisting that we live in a risky environment where it is important to look at both risks and benefits to innovation.

The opportunity to introduce reasonable levels of regulation was discussed as an instrument to ensure the necessary protection of citizens. From the industry perspective, the right balance should be found to achieve this objective and avoid unnecessary overregulation.

F.Grossetête concluded the discussions, saying that the current blockage at the EU level in the field of medicines was not a consequence of the lack of political courage of the EU Commission. She rather put back the blame on the EU Council for preventing the Commission to act because of any potential implications from such an action. As national Health Ministers block any development at the European level, the Commission and the European Parliament should unite their forces in front of the EU Council. In her view, MEPs needed the support of patients’ associations to have the political will to make things change towards better information.

“Whilst it recognises patients’ potential interest to access information from various sources, the UEMS believes that patients ultimately require accurate information provided by an independent medical practitioner.”

For further information, please contact the UEMS Secretariat.