

● Strategic Pediatric Alliance for the Future Health of Children in Europe ●

19 September, 2011

Dear President and Colleague,

First of all we want to apologize for the rather lengthy letter, but we think that it is important that there is as clear an understanding as possible as to what is evolving in Europe in the healthcare systems that will affect children. Many countries that up to now have had a paediatrician based primary care system for children have or are seriously thinking about changing to one where GP's are or will be the primary care providers.

An alarming report which appeared in a recent issue of the Economist, entitled "The Future of Health Care in Europe" compiled by the "Economist Intelligence Unit" draws a very grey picture of what is in store for Europe in so far as healthcare in general is concerned. Needless to say, this report will have outreaching influences in many Governments throughout Europe.

One of the main factors of this grim picture appears to be the rising costs of current health-care systems. The report emphasizes that as a direct consequence of this financial burden, seven, so called, trends will shape the future health care. One of these will see "General physicians" becoming more involved and important as "gatekeepers" to National Health Systems and act as coordinators of treatment for patients with multiple health issues. In addition, the report also identifies 5 possible "extreme scenarios" that will probably unfold for European healthcare in the next 20 years. Three of these scenarios include (a) European nations joining forces to create a single pan-European healthcare system, (b) preventive medicine taking precedence over treating the sick and (c) European healthcare systems focusing on vulnerable members of society.

The first of three above mentioned scenarios appears to be something which we see as being difficult to accomplish given the various existing situations in Europe concerning who takes care of children at the primary care level. The second scenario refers to "prevention", a facet of medicine which is an integral part of a paediatrician's principal function. The third identifies only geriatric patients as the vulnerable members of society. Nowhere in the report are children mentioned or considered as a vulnerable section of society, let alone, paediatricians

Obviously, within the report there are some clear negligences if we consider the care of children. On the one hand the report emphasizes the introduction of GP's as "gatekeepers" and in the envisioned future scenarios it refers to competencies which are typical of Pediatric practice, i.e. focusing on vulnerable (section of) society and focusing on preventive medicine, but no such referral is specifically made to paediatrics. It's as if children don't exist!

The importance of children and the doctors who should be taking care of them are too frequently underestimated by governments, hopefully only because they lack a clear understanding that a child is not just a small adult and needs, especially in the earliest years of their lives, a particularly trained physician to assure that they grow and develop into sound, productive citizens.

Governmental officials should be reminded that what happens to children in the earliest years of their lives is of critical importance not only to their immediate well-being, but also to their future. The care and attention a child receives in the first 8 years of life are critical and influence the child for life. Children who are well nurtured and cared for in these early years are more likely to survive, to grow in an appropriate manner, to have fewer illnesses and most importantly to develop appropriate thinking, language, emotional and social skills. Therefore, every child must be assured the best start in life, not only does their future depend on it but also the future of their communities, nations and the world. All parents should be taught by appropriately trained care givers to know and recognize the warning signs that indicate when the child's growth and development are faltering. There should be no doubt in the well documented findings which substantiate the fact that prevention is more cost-effective than treating a problem later. This of course reflects one of the 5 scenarios identified for European healthcare in the next 20 years.

Currently, Europe has 3 different health-care systems that deal with children at the primary care level: (a) complete GP system, (b) complete pediatric system and (c) combined GP and Pediatric system. However, over the last 8-10 years there has been an enormously increasing percent of countries that have gone from either the Pediatric or the combined system to the GP system, and the trend appears to continue especially in view of the recent report from the Economist.

At the present time there are 2.2 billion children in the world which represent approximately 32% of the world's population of which 27% are below 15 years of age. Children still comprise an important and sizeable portion of the population and therefore need to be considered, but above all need doctors that have been appropriately trained to take care of their developmental, social, environmental and medical needs.

Unfortunately, many countries are either autonomously considering the change-over to a GP system or they are being coerced to change over in lieu of financial support. This is probably occurring on the presumed premise that it costs less to maintain a GP system than a Pediatrician-based system. In response to this assumption, there is increasingly accumulating data that show that for governments it is much more economical, when all variables are considered, to have pediatricians take care of children than having GP's take care of them, as one would logically suspect.

Upholding the rights and ensuring the healthy growth and development of the young child, through appropriate changes in legislation and practices, does not happen overnight! Nevertheless, governments have the obligation to fulfill their commitments to children (their future citizens), and parents/guardians, educators and, above all, paediatricians, as advocates for children, must hold them accountable to the Convention on the Rights of a Child. When governments, civil societies and the international community work toward a common goal, i.e. the protection of children, great accomplishments can be achieved.

All this preliminary information finally leads to the intention of this letter. We have had direct information from some countries that have sought financial help from the IMF/World Bank that they would be helped only if the government changes to a GP system. This type of "blackmail" cannot be condoned under any circumstance, first because it is based on false pretenses and secondly because it directly involves the wellbeing of children.

We must protect our children! At no other time in history, is it becoming so important for pediatricians to truly be the advocates of children. Only the pediatrician knows the complexities of the different phases of a growing child and the importance of having a physician whose professional training was completely devoted to understand, as much as possible, on how to give the child all the best possible chances of developing into a productive component of his adult society.

From preliminary research, we have concluded that your country either has a pediatric-based primary healthcare system for children, a GP-based primary health care systems, a mixed system or has recently changed from a paediatrician to a GP primary care system. We would like you to confirm which of these applies to your country, but more importantly we would like to know if your government is thinking about changing over to a complete GP system and if so what this decision is presumably based on?

We would also like to know if you think that EAP, ECPCP and EPA, joining forces with you or designated governmental people from your country, and hopefully with the help of such organizations as WHO-Europe, UNICEF, etc may help in influencing who should and will be taking care of children in your country.

Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter.

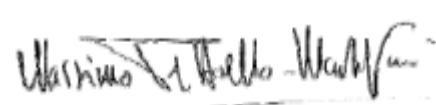
Sincerely yours,



Elke Jaeger-Roman
President, ECPCP



Alfred Tenore
President, EAP



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Secretary General, EPA