Editorial

Twenty Year WHO Principles of Patients' Rights in Europe, a Common Framework: Looking Back to the Future

1 Introduction

The WHO Declaration on the promotion of the rights of the patient in Europe is a dynamic tool for the protection and promotion of patients' rights and responsibilities in relation to health and healthcare. Moving beyond advocacy, the common European framework aims at the observance of the rights of the patient in daily practice, notably by strengthening the partnership between healthcare providers and patients. The principles in the WHO Declaration are key elements for respect of human rights (individual and social) in relation to health and healthcare, and therefore of special importance for health policies. The implementation of patients' rights being primarily a national matter, the Declaration is a reference document for patients' rights policies, regulation and implementation in daily practice.

During the European Consultation on the text of the Declaration in 1994, patients' rights were placed in the context and perspective of significant emerging trends:

1 The Declaration was launched in 1994 during a European Consultation on the Rights of the Patient, held in Amsterdam on 28-30 March 1994. The Consultation was convened under the auspices of WHO Regional Office for Europe, and hosted by the Government of the Netherlands.

– patient information and health education,
– provider — patient relationship,
– social rights
– citizens’ views on healthcare reforms.

These four fields are core conditions for the effective realisation of patients’ rights in daily practice:

*Patient information and health education* seeks to empower patients as participants in, rather than as passive recipients of their care and treatment. Free and effective dissemination of information about causes and prevention of disease and disability, and about the protection and promotion of health, enables people to understand their responsibilities (and duties) for their own health and for the health of others, to avoid consumerism and not to unnecessarily burden healthcare.

The *provider and receiver of care relationship* is critical to the realisation of the concept of partnership in healthcare. An essential condition for such a partnership is adequate training of health professionals in the field of the rights of the patient.

The goal of *social rights* is to ensure the fullest participation of all people in society (equity). In relation to health this implies effective, equitable and politically viable methods of financing healthcare, equity in access to quality care and equity in outcome.

*Citizens’ views:* Citizens’ participation in the decision-making process will lead to public acceptance of health policy goals. Patient/citizen participation is an indispensable component in healthcare reforms.3, 4

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