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## TITLE / TITRE

Heidelberg resolution on information to patient

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# Heidelberg Resolution on Information to Patients

4<sup>th</sup> European Medical Students' Council, Heidelberg, Germany

## Background:

The European Medical Students' Council is a body which represents the political views of medical students across geographical Europe.

The Council held its fourth meeting from the 30<sup>th</sup> May till the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2007 in Heidelberg, Germany.

The *Heidelberg Resolution* details the four main issues on the theme of Information to Patients (ITP):

- A. Improving Information to Patients by better Medical Education
- B. Patient Empowerment and Information to Patients
- C. The role of the pharmaceutical industry in providing Information to Patients
- D. Collaboration between physicians and pharmacists in informing patients

## Introduction:

Given the dramatic advances in the availability of health information, ITP is an increasingly important issue for all health care professionals. Past and current actions undertaken by the European Union [1, 2] are first steps in the right direction. The *Heidelberg Resolution* shows the medical students' perspective on further steps to be taken to improve ITP.

In the information age, physicians must take into consideration all possible sources of information that patients may access. These include the healthcare team, the media and alternative resources.

### I. Healthcare team

The healthcare team includes healthcare professionals such as physicians, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists and physiotherapists as well as medical students and other healthcare providers.

### II. Media

Regarding media, patients generally use television, radio, internet, magazines, newspapers, promotion materials (e.g. flyers and leaflets) and books as sources of healthcare-related information.

### III. Alternative resources

Patients may refer to alternative sources of information, such as relatives, friends and neighbours as well as providers of complementary and alternative medicine. In certain circumstances they may also refer to religion as a source of information.

## **A. Improving Information to Patients by better Medical Education**

**The Council strongly believes that upon graduation physicians should know how to effectively give Information to Patients. This entails five key areas.**

### ***1. Knowledge***

Adequate medical knowledge is the basis of information-competence and safety. Therefore we conclude that newly graduated physicians should:

- Be aware of the benefits, complications and side-effects of therapeutic interventions.
- Be aware of the limits of their knowledge. They should consult appropriate information sources and senior colleagues when necessary.

### ***2. Setting***

When newly graduated physicians are providing patients with information they should consider the following:

- Attention should be given to the atmosphere and the surroundings in which ITP is delivered (e.g. a separate room should be available for giving ITP).
- It should be made sure that there is no disturbance during a consultation.

### ***3. Communication Skills***

Patient understanding and empathy are paramount to effective ITP and Patient Empowerment. We recommend that the newly graduated physician should:

- Adapt language appropriately to the patient.
- Take the patient's psycho-socio-cultural background into account.
- Foster trust within the physician-patient relationship.
- Remain polite and show empathy towards the patient when giving information.
- Be able to assess individual patient information requirements.
- Set aside adequate time to deal with individual patient information needs. This should include both the provision of information and the opportunity for patients' questions.
- Judge when is the best time to disclose sensitive health information.
- Employ appropriate strategies when imparting bad news.
- Be able to resolve conflicts which arise when the wishes of a patient and those of a third party differ regarding ITP.

These steps encourage the desirable practice of Shared Decision Making.

#### ***4. Legal considerations***

The law impacts upon every aspect of medical practice including ITP. Therefore newly graduated physicians should:

- Be aware of the legal regulations concerning ITP that exist in their jurisdiction (e.g. when providing information for a pre-operative Informed Consent).
- Abide by the laws existing in their jurisdiction governing patient access to information.
- Act in accordance with existing national frameworks and guidelines concerning ITP.
- Remind the patients of their right to refuse treatment and/or be used for education of health care professionals.
- Remember the duty of confidentiality owed to their patients when dealing with issues of ITP.

#### ***5. Provision of additional information***

The Council acknowledges the vast array of information sources available to patients. Therefore newly graduated physicians should:

- Be aware of the importance of quality assurance when referring patients to additional resources.
- Engage with patients to correct misconceptions arising from unreliable information sources.

## **B. Patient Empowerment and Information to Patients**

Patients are demanding a greater say in decisions about their treatment [3] and the physician-patient relationship is changing to reflect this. The Council welcomes the process of Patient Empowerment.

Physicians must strive to incorporate patients' wishes into how they deliver ITP. The physician-patient relationship should be based on trust and engage with Shared Decision Making when appropriate [4].

### **Patients need to know:**

- Accurate information about their condition, including the working diagnosis
- The prospect of rehabilitation and the natural course of the disease
- The possible treatments and outcomes, including:
  - Explanations on the proposed treatment options
  - Alternative treatment options
  - Probability of success of the possible treatments
  - Side effects and complications of the treatment options, including pain
  - Who will perform the treatment
- Costs of treatment incurring to the patient
- Sources of reliable additional information [5]

It is important to reflect ITP practice and accordingly engage with feedback on the provision of information by physicians. This should form the basis of improvement to practice.

## **C. The role of the pharmaceutical industry in providing Information to patients**

The **European Medical Students' Council** states that:

- We affirm that healthcare professionals are and should remain the primary source of information to patients.
- We welcome the current Community legislation prohibiting the advertising of prescription-only medicines to others than healthcare professionals.
- We are concerned that current initiatives by the pharmaceutical industry to provide patients with information may serve as a form of indirect marketing [6]. We propose stricter regulation on the information to patients provided by pharmaceutical companies (e.g. the requirement to detail preventative measures and a balanced appraisal of all evidence based treatments.)
- Where the impartiality of a patients' information source is compromised by a conflict of interest, this should be clearly stated on any material published (e.g. funding by a pharmaceutical company.)
- We are concerned that websites promoting prescription-only pharmaceuticals and hosted in non-EU countries, have the potential to undermine Community legislation since these websites can be accessed by EU citizens.
- We call for an evidence-based evaluation of the health consequences arising from the public marketing of over the counter (OTC) drugs.
- We request the pharmaceutical industry to produce package leaflets that specifically target patients.

## **D. Collaboration between physicians and pharmacists in informing patients**

The **European Medical Students' Council** states that:

- We acknowledge the valuable role of pharmacists in providing information to patients.
- Developing partnerships between physicians and pharmacists as well as all other healthcare professionals is essential for improving the process of informing patients.
- We believe that inter-professional education of medical and pharmaceutical students is the starting point for developing cooperation and fostering communication [7]. Therefore, we call for joint educational programmes involving both professions.

## References

- [1] High Level Group on Innovation and Provision of Medicines (2002), G10 Medicines Group, Recommendations for action
- [2] High Level Pharmaceutical Forum (2007), Public consultation on Health related information to patients
- [3] European Patients' Forum (2003), European Patients demand access to information for all disease areas
- [4] Coulter A. et al. (1999), Sharing decisions with patients: is the information good enough?, *BMJ* 318;318-322
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- [6] Sugahara, A. (2003) 'Pharma goes direct in Japan', *The McKinsey Quarterly* 3, 23–25.
- [7] World Healthcare Students' Symposium (2005), Statement of Beliefs, Malta