



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Engelberg, 29 September 2005

Public Evening during the 4th Dialogue on Science in Engelberg

Where is healthcare going?

Who or what is the cause of the cost explosion in the healthcare system? What should and can we all do to stop this development? Answers to these questions were sought at the Public Evening of the Academia Engelberg on Wednesday by the 150 or so participants, including healthcare experts, scientists, politicians and interested parties from the region (Pd).

In his opening presentation, Professor Georg Kohler from the University of Zürich put forward the idea that we are living today in a Maserati or luxury era. "Medical engineering takes the place of medical impotence. Thanks the steady developments being made in this field, we can all remain forever young and beautiful, as the pop star Madonna shows us for example." He went on to say that "values serve as a guide, but they are not fixed stars – even in the heavens of the healthcare system. They also change along with societal and social developments. Progress in science compels us to draw political limits".

Lack of competition

"The healthcare market is a phenomenon - although there are more and more providers, the services do not get any cheaper", said Elisabeth Gander, Government Councillor and Health Director of Canton Obwalden. Thomas Zeltner, Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (BAG), replied that this is made impossible by the regulations. But he said that he could well imagine competition in the quality of the services provided. But he pointed out that it is difficult to measure and assess this quality. What is worth noting, however, is that relatives of doctors make far less use of health services out of quality considerations.

Global increase in costs

According to Thomas Zeltner, countries such as Germany, Great Britain, Norway, Canada and the USA are confronted with the same phenomenon: For years, the cost of healthcare has increased by five to seven percent, regardless of the healthcare system concerned. All these systems have one thing in common: an overly complex system with countless actors. "It is like a Tinguely machine, you turn a wheel here, and it clatters in quite a different place." In response to a question from the public as to how the costs can be brought under control at least to some extent, Thomas Zeltner expressed the view, firstly, that about 20% could be saved with "managed care" models. Secondly, he said that hospital finances needed to be reorganized with the involvement of the funding bodies. And thirdly, he added, we should stop putting all the blame on the ageing of society. This accounts for only about 0.6 percent of the increase per year, he said.

Change in expectations

Thomas Zeltner observed that “in the last 40 years, we in Switzerland have succumbed to the illusion that medical services are available everywhere at all times.” Professor Kohler expressed the view that the complexity of the system meant that people could no longer develop an awareness of price. Usually, he said, they do not know how expensive a treatment or a medicine is. Professor and paediatrician Susanne Suter added that she experienced a certain level expectation at the University Hospital in Geneva: “If parents are adamant that they want an antibiotic for their child, then they are prepared to pay for it. But very often a certain medicine is not all beneficial and yet parents still demand that it be used.” She sees many people in her practice who have social problems and believe they can solve these with medicines.

The need for political decisions

After two hours of lively discussion with the public, a consensus was reached that a set of guidelines are needed to help stop the spiralling costs in healthcare. Politicians must ultimately define what services are to be covered by the system and what services should be covered by patients themselves. But consumers also have to change their attitudes: “When it comes to treatment, we do not always have to drive a Maserati, often a VW will get us there just as well” said Professor Walter Siegenthaler from University Hospital Zürich, but people have to play along. In his closing words, Professor Kohler added his contribution to these demands and pointed out that “we also have to accept that we have to die at some stage”.

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Further information for the media can be obtained from Academia Engelberg, Beatrice Suter, KommunikationsWerkstatt GmbH, Tel. 0041- 79 - 211 10 44, e-mail: kommwerk@tic.ch.

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