



Europe urgently needs an effective strategy to deal with healthcare-associated infections

Healthcare-Associated Infections:

- Cause unnecessary suffering to patients
- Trigger unnecessary and preventable costs
- Result in avoidable penal and civil litigation

Europe urgently needs an effective strategy to deal with healthcare-associated infections (HCAs).

According to the European Commission, there are approximately **three million HCAs and 50,000 attributable deaths** in the European Union each year. This is clearly a health crisis requiring pan-European leadership. HCAs constitute an increasing proportion of the overall burden of disease in European societies. Control and prevention of HCAs must, therefore, be a high priority for the European Union. Indeed there is much that can be done - the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in its First Report on Communicable Diseases (published in June 2007) noted that **up to 30% of HCAs are preventable.**

Health First Europe (HFE) enthusiastically welcomed the Commission's HCAs consultation in early 2006, perceiving EU-level action to tackle a truly pan-European health problem as being essential. Much time has passed since the consultation, but Commissioner Kyprianou has recently announced¹ that the Commission will make the fight against HCAs one of the main priorities for 2008.

HFE believes that urgent action is required and calls on and encourages the European Commission and Member States to rapidly agree and adopt appropriate measures in order to significantly reduce HCAs across Europe. There is much expertise in Europe and examples of best practice need to be assessed and communicated effectively and their urgent adoption actively encouraged.

¹ The First European Communicable Disease Epidemiological Report
http://www.ecdc.eu.int/pdf/Epi_report_2007.pdf (see page 3)

Points for action

While there is neither a simple nor single answer to this infection control crisis, HFE believes that the four-pronged approach outlined below could increase the protection of patients, healthcare workers and others who enter healthcare settings against the risk of potentially fatal infections. Emphasis must be placed on:

- Developing effective surveillance and understanding of HCAs;
- Early detection and preventative measures;
- Better provision of education about HCAs for healthcare providers and recipients
- The increased use of innovative technologies and services designed to reduce the likelihood of infection.

Effective surveillance and understanding of HCAs

Before the problem of HCAs can be tackled effectively it must be first truly understood – the Commission has a role to play here in collating national data at EU level to support / underpin policy-making in this area. HCAs are a complicated area and this topic should be broken down further into sub-classifications such as by type of infection and part of the body infected, e.g. bloodstream infections; surgical site infections; ventilator-associated pneumonia; Urinary Tract Infection (UTI). This level of detail and understanding would facilitate a more effective surveillance and reporting system, help healthcare systems across Europe achieve better outcomes related to HCAs, aid management processes and highlight significant differences across Europe. Information collated should be openly available to all stakeholders in the process. For example, there is large variation in the reported rates of surgical site infections across the European Union.





Early detection, preventative measures

Early detection during healthcare interventions - for example, through rapid pre-admission screening and ongoing surveillance - is a major element of effective infection control. Equally, effective HCAI prevention can reduce costs to national healthcare budgets as prevention is frequently more cost-efficient than remedy. Urgent implementation should be encouraged with appropriate incentives being provided. Based on established best practices, the necessary measures to minimise HCAs in patients should be communicated and consistent implementation across the EU encouraged.

The Commission should:

- Identify and communicate the essential practices necessary to enable timely and rapid detection and subsequent management of infections;
- Promote development and implementation of common evidence-based guidelines that outline strategies to prevent HCAs across the EU;
- Encourage appropriate targeting and use of antibiotics in order to minimise antibiotic resistance;
- Ensure that measures to protect healthcare workers from blood-borne infections due to occupational injuries from contaminated needles are clearly defined and implemented as an integral part of the appropriate EU worker health and safety directives.

The European Commission must:

- Ensure co-operation and co-ordination of strategies, research, knowledge and practice between all healthcare organisations;
- Develop and agree European guidelines for care and quality control, and develop and recommend mutual sensitive quality indicators;
- Identify a common methodology to gather information on the quality of the services, the safeguards in place and the mechanisms to address complaints. Patient-sensitive indicators (for example, patient safety, complications, and experience) should be developed to support and evaluate EU policy-making.

Unsafe practices that can increase the risk of infection should be highlighted and eliminated. No compromises should be taken with regard to the cleanliness and sterility of the environment and medical devices used.

Better education, continuous professional development and information for healthcare providers and recipients

Knowledge = Health. Europe must aspire to set the standard for education in the context of combating HCAs. The Commission must encourage and support education as part of its broader social policy objectives. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on providing appropriate training and recertification of healthcare professionals who are at the forefront of tackling HCAs. Equally, there is a need for continuous awareness-raising for patients who enter the healthcare environment. Patients and relatives need to be provided with clear information about HCAs and the risks and preventative measures they can take to mitigate their chance of spreading / acquiring a HCAI when they receive healthcare.

The European Commission should:

- Ensure the implementation of existing guidelines, such as those by the WHO with respect to hand hygiene;
- Encourage Member States to provide continuous appropriate training – for example, on the latest HCAI mitigation techniques - for healthcare professionals and facilitate an open learning culture where immediate reporting of mistakes and incidents are communicated widely without fear of ‘name and shame’.

National governments, health organisations and senior hospital managers should take responsibility for developing a safety culture and promote patient safety modules as a core part of health education.

The European Commission should:

- Develop and facilitate access to information by, for example, encouraging the establishment of an independent point of contact in each Member State (a patient’s Ombudsman) that can act as an advocate for the patient (as is the case in Germany and Italy);
- Establish a process to collate and disseminate comprehensive information to assist patients in making an informed decision regarding their choice of healthcare;
- Engage in further initiatives on patient information along the lines of the high-level forum currently operating under the remit of DG Enterprise and DG Health and Consumer Protection.

Support for innovative solutions for a complex problem

Medical innovations are available today that can track and communicate the spread of infections through healthcare institutions and target optimal antibiotic usage. An increasing number of medical technologies incorporate features such as antimicrobial coatings and safer closed intravenous access systems to help prevent bloodstream infections. The rapid introduction of these and other innovative technologies should be actively encouraged. The use of such technology can be wrongly perceived as a mere cost to healthcare budgets when it should be seen as a vital investment. The savings accumulated by the use of such technology can be tremendous, not just for healthcare but also for other sectors of society and policy.

- To reduce the number of HCAs and overall costs, the European Commission should actively encourage Member States to ensure access to medical innovations that promote patient and healthcare worker safety. As stated in the Luxembourg Declaration on Patient Safety, patients have a right to expect that every effort is made to ensure their safety as users of all health services.



In conclusion:

HFE encourages the European Commission and Member States to urgently adopt an effective strategy encompassing appropriate measures to significantly reduce healthcare-associated infections across Europe.

Health First Europe (HFE) is an alliance of patients, doctors, nurses, academics, experts and industry that aims to ensure that equitable access to modern, innovative and reliable medical technology and healthcare is regarded as a vital investment in the future of Europe. The core messages of HFE are:

- There are weaknesses in European healthcare systems; a rethink is required in order to meet current and future health challenges;
- Patients and clinicians should have equitable access to modern, innovative and reliable medical technology;
- The development of new and flexible modes of healthcare delivery will benefit both patients and healthcare providers;
- Health equals wealth. Health is a productive economic factor in terms of employment, innovation and economic growth.

Since our launch in March 2004, HFE has been involved in numerous activities (awareness-raising events, position papers, press releases, etc.) aimed at encouraging Europe to lead the way in developing a truly patient-centred healthcare, where every European citizen is able to benefit from the best medical treatments available. For full details of our activities, please visit our website:

www.healthfirsteurope.org

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European Federation of Crohn's and Ulcerative Colitis Associations (EFCCA)
European Federation of National Associations of Orthopaedics and Traumatology (EFORT)
European Federation of Nurses Associations (EFN)
European Federation of Public Service Employees Unions (EUROFEDOP)
European Health Telematics Association (EHTEL)
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European Medical Association (EMA)
European Medical Technology Industry Association (EUCOMED)
European Society of Cardiology (ESC)
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