

# Primary Care should be of primary concern!

Opinion adopted by the Expert Panel on Effective Ways  
of Investing in Health

## WHAT IS PRIMARY CARE?

Primary care is the type of assistance we usually seek first when we are feeling ill or have health concerns. We go to see general practitioners/family physicians, dentists, occupational therapists, midwives, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, psychologists, optometrists, and social workers – among others – who can give us a diagnosis and provide immediate help.

While almost all of us have received primary care, it hasn't been defined in a precise way that could help establish EU standards, statistics, and best practices. The task of providing that definition was part of the mandate that the European Commission gave to its independent Expert Panel that was set up to provide advice on effective ways of investing in health.

The definition the Expert Panel agreed upon is that primary care is “the provision of universally accessible, integrated, person-centred, comprehensive health and community services provided by a team of professionals accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health needs. These services are delivered in a sustained partnership with patients and informal caregivers, in the context of family and community, and play a central role in the overall coordination and continuity of people’s care.”

This may seem complex, but each element is an integral part of setting a standard for optimal primary care. All EU citizens should have access to affordable, good-quality care, and providers should not only be trained in medicine but also in other skills that allow them to be more patient-centred and comprehensive in their approach.



## WHY WAS THE EXPERT PANEL ASKED TO LOOK AT PRIMARY CARE?

Primary care is the entry point into the health system. It is here where patients can present their complaints and questions and where they must be initially diagnosed, treated, and when needed referred for specialist management in secondary care settings. Strong primary care systems contribute to equity and improved health outcomes. That may sound self-evident, but it isn't as obvious when you see the complexity of the problems presented and the need for an approach that looks at biomedical, psychosocial and contextual factors while integrating patients' goals.

## WHEN SHOULD PRIMARY CARE PROVIDERS REFER PATIENTS TO SECONDARY CARE?

New technology allows specialist expertise to be integrated into primary care without having to move patients from one location to another for tests or treatments. But primary care givers must be able to refer patients elsewhere if needed, particularly in urgent situations and when their problems are complex. That's why group practices and interprofessional Community Health Centres can be particularly beneficial and efficient; they also provide opportunities for second opinions at the primary care level.

## WHO SHOULD PAY FOR PRIMARY CARE?

Policies on paying for care differ greatly between Member States, but charging patients when they need to access a general practitioner/family physician does not seem to lead to long-term cost containment. The Expert Panel recommends that countries monitor the effect of any user charges on financial protection, equity, quality, efficiency and health outcomes. Everyone in the EU should be able to afford and have access to comprehensive primary care services.

## ASKING QUESTIONS IS THE FIRST STEP IN FINDING ANSWERS

The Expert Panel identified numerous research questions as priorities for developing primary care in the EU, such as what new forms of diagnostic tests are available and used? How can care become more person-centred, integrating the goals of the individual? What is the role of informal carers, e.g. people looking after their relatives, and how can they be supported? How can professionals be given the best skill set to work in the community? In addition to these general questions, the Expert Panel identified research questions pertaining to referrals and financing.



## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE PRIMARY CARE?

The Expert Panel outlined the most important strategic directions that can be taken at EU level and by individual countries and regions.

These include encouraging countries to strengthen primary care, making it universally accessible, and capable of addressing a broad range of problems, strengthening the community-orientation of primary care with a special emphasis on health promotion and prevention, stimulating the training of an appropriate workforce and establishing an exchange of best practices to create a European learning community for primary care.

It is also important to create an integrated partnership between patients, providers and informal caregivers. Taking good care of ourselves and each other is in all of our best interests!

To see the full "Definition of a frame of reference in relation to primary care with a special emphasis on financing systems and referral systems" Opinion, please go to [http://ec.europa.eu/health/expert\\_panel/opinions/docs/004\\_definitionprimarycare\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/expert_panel/opinions/docs/004_definitionprimarycare_en.pdf)