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Medicines in Europe: where are we headed?

In early 2009, European pharmaceutical policy is still in the hands of the European Commission's Enterprise and Industry Directorate-General, rather than the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (also known as DG Sanco). This choice is yet another all-too-obvious stumbling block on the path to a Europe that places health and welfare as its chief preoccupations.

Every proposed directive, regulation and other bit of legislation shaping European pharmaceutical policy carries, from the outset, a short-sighted pro-industry bias: to defend the industry's economic interests, to develop competition and competitiveness, to create a single market. Experience shows that these objectives are a far cry from concerns such as improving access to well-evaluated drugs and bringing tangible benefits to patients.

Pro-industry to the bitter end. In October 2008, the Enterprise and Industry Directorate was supposed to publish a new "pharmaceutical package" of directives and regulations, particularly concerning patient information. Cleverly disguised as serving patients' interests, the Directorate's proposals were in fact intended to lift the ban on direct-to-consumer advertising for prescription drugs.

Consciousness raising? The Industry Directorate's proposal worried Commissioners from several other European Commission directorates, and they dared to oppose the move, in particular the new Commissioner of the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers.

The Industry Directorate had to postpone and in the end to amend its proposal. This clash between commissioners bodes well for patients and healthcare professionals. It underscores the need to link medicines with questions of health (and with DG Sanco), instead of treating them as just another business.

And it is encouraging to all those who believe that a Europe devoted to health and welfare is both necessary and possible.

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