

**GIRP LUNCH RECEPTION AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
26 NOVEMBER 2003
BRUSSELS**

**Suggested Speech by
Maria da Graça Carvalho
Minister for Science and Higher Education - Portugal**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to have the opportunity to address such a European wide public in my newly elected position of Minister for Science and Higher Education in Portugal.

Health is a concern to us all, and is becoming a European and even a global concern. We need to work together to find ways to make our health systems more open, transparent and effective, while ensuring that national needs and concerns are fully respected, and that their functioning is not disrupted.

All players in the healthcare market, researchers, doctors, the industry, wholesalers and pharmacists, play a key role in ensuring the high level of healthcare that we encounter throughout the European Union. With the enlargement approaching at high speed, this vital role can only be emphasised. For better addressing the future need of our citizens we need more innovation, research and education. I am pleased to notice that these needs have been recognized in the Commission Communication on the G10 process.

Healthcare is an issue of key concern and interest to the citizens of the European Union, and indeed, to those of the enlarged Union that we are looking forward to welcoming next year. It is a basic right of our citizens to have access, easily and quickly if needed, to high quality care and cures throughout Europe.

However we still have a lot to work on before achieving fair and equal access to medicines within the EU. The principle of subsidiarity of Member States, which is legitimate for all questions related to the reimbursement of medicines, however, is sometimes in conflict to fair and equal access at the European level.

That is why it is important to continually search for new products, solutions and services to health problems/concerns and to educate the European citizens to be health conscious. The European Union has already done a lot in the field of health prevention and education. It is my opinion that we should now define a common framework that will bring us closer to equality in the field healthcare.

The Commission launched a Consultation on what should be a service of general interest and if they should be subject to public service obligations at the European

level. The Treaty establishing the European Community already mentions “services of general economic interest”. This consultation broadens the term and the question whether health services should be considered as of “general interest” immediately arises.

I know that our host, the association GIRP, has already made its position known.

The provision of medicines is already subject to public services obligations in several Member State, including Portugal (Dec.-Law n° 135/95 of the 9th of June), Spain, Greece, Italy, Belgium, France, and Finland. In Portugal for instance, the wholesalers have the obligation to ensure a “permanent availability of medicines which may be deemed sufficient in quantity and variety terms, to promptly address the needs of a certain geographic area”.

At the European level, the current legal framework, through Directive 2001/83/EC, leaves it up to the Member States if they wish to impose public service obligations on pharmaceutical wholesalers. I believe, that distribution and consequently the access to medicines in the EU should be subject to the same high quality standards throughout all Member States.

Equal access to medicines can indeed be considered as serving the general interest of European citizens.

Pharmaceutical full-line wholesalers are committed health professionals and play a vital role in safeguarding the health of our citizens: they provide continuous supply of medicines to pharmacies and hospitals. As Minister for Science and Higher Education, I tend to focus on the role of research and innovation in the pharmaceutical field. This alone is not sufficient, as even the best and most efficient medicine is of no use, if it is not available when and where it is needed. Portugal has indeed elected health as a priority area.

I thank you for your attention and wish you all a healthy lunch.