

*The Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) represents national medical associations across Europe. We are committed to contributing the medical profession's point of view to EU and European policy-making through pro-active cooperation on a wide range of health and healthcare related issues.*

## Statement on the independence of the medical profession

The independence of the medical profession across Europe faces increasing challenges. As European doctors we underline what is at stake for doctors, patients and society as a whole if it is not safeguarded and reinforced:

- National medical associations, both CPME full members and associate members, report challenges to the independence of the profession at the level of individual doctors, medical facilities and the organised representation of doctors. These challenges can take many forms:
  - Individual doctors have faced governmental pressure to break patient-doctor confidentiality and report names of patients seeking their care to identify undocumented migrants or protesters for the purposes of launching prosecutions.
  - Financial actors without medical background or mandate are accessing the ownership and governance of medical facilities as capital investors to skew patient care to the maximum economic profitability of services and restricting doctors in their clinical practice.
  - National medical associations voicing their opposition to government policy have been taxed in the form of retaliatory changes to their status, such as the loss of mandatory membership, dismissal of their leadership, or in the most extreme cases even imprisonment of organisations' leaders.
  - Another threat facing medical associations is restrictions on their ability to take collective action seriously limiting the ability to take industrial action.

- Trust between patients and doctors can only exist if the doctor's autonomy is real. Doctors in Europe must be enabled to practice free from undue interference of administration, economy or insurances<sup>1</sup>.
- Clinical independence is necessary to be able to deliver high quality healthcare and act in a patient's best interest. However, this autonomy is balanced by the need to ensure accountability for a decision, as professional responsibility. Physicians also have a role managing scarce healthcare resources for the benefit of patients and society. We highlight that professional responsibility is not to be understood only in relation to guidelines, but in particular as a tool of accountability to patients and peers. It goes beyond legal liability and has a broader ethical and societal dimension. It is this societal accountability which is also at the heart of the concept of autonomy for the medical profession as a whole<sup>2</sup>.
- A doctor's primary ethical responsibility is to benefit the health of the patients whom they serve. We reaffirm that the clinical independence and autonomy of doctors is key to ensuring high quality healthcare which is tailored to each patient's specific health needs<sup>3</sup>.
- We reiterate that if clinical decision-making is undermined by administrative interference with this role of the doctor, the rights of patients to have doctors responsible for their high-quality healthcare could be seriously threatened. Unfortunately, this could also include reduced trust in treatment, decreased compliance and loss of social trust in healthcare.
- We furthermore observe that the existence of robust organisations representing the medical profession strengthens democracy.
- Independence is key in making patients' right to health a reality and safeguarding the highest quality of medical practice and autonomy.

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<sup>1</sup> CPME vision statement

<sup>2</sup> Professional Autonomy and Responsibility', adopted by CPME in November 1999

<sup>3</sup> CPME resolution on Professional Autonomy and Clinical Independence of the Medical Profession in Europe, adopted in June 2009