

Introduction

The General Health Act 14/1986 of the 25th of April establishes that the National Health System is composed of the health services provided by the State and the Autonomous Communities, and includes all the health care facilities and services which it is the public administration's responsibility to provide in order to comply with the right to health protection.

The General Health Act establishes equity as the fundamental principle of the National Health System, in the sense that it effectively guarantees equal access and health services in its fullest form, so that it must incorporate actions that promote health and the prevention of illness as well as medical assistance, healing, rehabilitation and palliative care. The provision of health care must be carried out within a cohesive territorial framework which guarantees equality in the exercise of the citizen's rights to health care and protection, by means of an efficient management of public resources.

In order to assist the National Health System in its response to these challenges, and taking its mandate from the second Presidential Conference, the Spanish Ministry of Health and Consumers' Affairs drew up the Quality Plan for the National Health System, which was unveiled in March 2006.

Its aim is to develop strategies which will guarantee the highest quality health care for the whole of the population, regardless of the area of residence. These strategies must complement those which are offered by the health services of the Autonomous Communities in carrying out their responsibilities.

The Quality Plan is structured around 6 major areas of activity, 12 strategies, 41 objectives and nearly 200 measures. These include measures to improve patient safety, intensify the evaluation of medical technology, extend the introduction of new technology in pursuit of the benefits it offers to both professionals and patients, or balance the human resources policy with the requirements of the system. There are also measures that aim to combat inequality in the area of health care, reinforce the services for outpatients and the systems of epidemiological vigilance. Among the other measures included are programmes to prevent child obesity and underage alcohol consumption, the announcement of awards for quality and the development of programmes to increase the knowledge of uncommon illnesses and to improve the quality of the care offered to the patients that suffer from them. Steps are also outlined to improve assistance for more common complaints such as cancer, ischaemic heart diseases or diabetes, among others.

Strategy 3 of the Quality Plan has the specific objective of promoting health policies based on best practices, by means of description, rationalisation, analysis and comparison between policies, programmes and services. Likewise, it also has the aim of making the information about the

Health System and the services it offers, in terms of their evolution, problems and achievements, available to users, professionals and decision-makers.

The Observatory of the National Health System was set up with the aim of being the tool that would provide this analysis, and every year it produces a continuous overall analysis of the Public Health System for the Interterritorial Council of the National Health System. The data and indicators used are derived from the health system's own information system as well as the data from the health services of the Autonomous Communities concerning their areas of activity, the services provided, their health management and the results within their territory.

Continuing with the arrangement that was implemented for last year's edition of the report, the Annual report on the National Health System 2006 will be structured in two parts, with a first part containing a general chapter, and a second part which consists of the chapters for each of the Autonomous Communities (in Spanish).

The following list of areas covered is valid not only for the general introductory chapter which details the development and analysis of the Health System, but also for each chapter written on the Autonomous Communities, in which the analysis is more thorough concerning each of their health services:

- Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the population.
- Monitoring the health conditions of the population.
- Development of legislation and institutions.
- Planning and health programmes.
- Equity.
- Aspects related with planning and development of human resources.
- Pharmacy.
- Research.
- Health information systems.
- Quality.
- Participation.
- Description of innovative experiences.

The consistently positive response of the health councillors of the Autonomous Communities to this initiative, and the ready willingness of their teams to collaborate in the compilation of this report has meant that every year sees an improvement and provides a clearer vision of the National Health System. It is easier now than ever before to gain a global perspective of the actions which the public health network is carrying out.

It is our wish that this report can be used as an effective tool for mutual learning and can contribute to an improvement in the knowledge of the National Health System and make it easier for our health system to progress and develop.