

- the procedure set out in Article 7(1) of the EU Treaty, which entered into force on 1 February 2003, also applies to the protection of the fundamental right to information safeguarded by Article 6 of the EU Treaty,

The Commission:

1. When does it intend to submit a communication on the state of media pluralism in the EU and a directive for safeguarding it, as requested in Parliament's resolution of 20 November 2002?
2. When does it intend to submit to the European Convention, as requested in Parliament's resolution of 20 November 2002, a proposal for a legal basis to protect the principle of pluralism and freedom within the information media in the new constitution?

Answer given by Mr Bolkestein on behalf of the Commission

(7 July 2003)

The Commission can only reiterate the position which it has already communicated to the Parliament (letter of 2 May 2003 from Ms de Palacio to Mr Rocard) regarding the possibility of follow-up action to the resolution of 20 November 2002.

As stated, the Commission does not intend to take action on the European Parliament resolution since the resolution deals with pluralism as a democratic and institutional value within each Member State, expressing the desire to maintain free and diversified media in all the Member States.

The existing Community instruments, which are founded on the legal bases of the Treaty of Rome, are designed to ensure a certain economic balance between economic operators and thus directly affect the media as an economic activity, but not — or only very indirectly — as a vehicle for delivering information to citizens.

The Commission does not therefore have the legal instruments to allow it to take the problems raised by the Honourable Members into consideration.

The Commission backed the inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights — Article 11 (2) of which clearly sets out the principle that the EU should respect freedom and pluralism of the media — in the draft Constitutional Treaty. This request has been taken into consideration and its inclusion features among the results of the Convention's work.

Finally, the Commission would point out that one of the issues dealt with in the Green Paper on services of general interest, which was adopted on 21 May 2003, is that of the protection of pluralism. The question is raised about whether the possibility of taking specific measures to protect pluralism should be re-examined at Community level and which measures could be envisaged. All interested parties are invited to submit their comments by 15 September 2003.

(2003/C 280 E/164)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1445/03

by Camilo Nogueira Román (Verts/ALE) to the Commission

(24 April 2003)

Subject: European citizens' right to health — Charter of EU Citizens' Health Rights

The EU institutions have not yet recognised the right to health for all European citizens. There are still unacceptable disparities between the health services provided by the different Member States. For instance, the average number of hospital beds per 1 000 inhabitants is 4,1 in Spain, as against 9,4 in Germany, 8,3 in France, 10,1 in Ireland and 11,3 in the Netherlands. The United Kingdom average has, as a result of the Thatcher Government's ultraliberal policy, stagnated at 4,4 beds. In Spain, Central Government policy has tended to favour private management of hospital centres and has reduced the number of health professionals per bed. There is even a trend, promoted by the governments of certain countries, towards privatisation of public health services, along the same lines as the United States, which is the developed country with the poorest health standards and the lowest life expectancy.

The European Union should therefore adopt a Charter of Health Rights and a European Health System, with due respect for the autonomy of each Member State. The Charter has already been promoted throughout the European Union by various citizens' groups, as well as political and trade union organisations. The Charter would be based on the principles of universality of health care and equal quality of services in all Member States, guaranteeing equal and free access to such services for all citizens through public funding.

Is the Commission prepared to promote the adoption of such a Charter of EU Citizens' Health Rights? Is it also prepared to promote a European health system?

Answer given by Mr Byrne on behalf of the Commission

(11 June 2003)

Article 152(5) of the EC Treaty clearly states that Community action in the field of public health shall fully respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care. Issues such as the average number of hospital beds per 1000 inhabitants, are therefore the responsibility of the Member States, not of the Community. In light of this, the Commission does not have the competence to come forward with proposals for a Charter of Union Citizens' Health Rights and for a European Health System.

Although we are not about to see the emergence of a Europe-wide health system, the coming years will see growing co-operation between Member States on healthcare issues. Issues in relation to this are currently under discussion by Health Ministers and other stakeholders in the high level reflection process on patient mobility and healthcare developments in the Union.

(2003/C 280 E/165)

WRITTEN QUESTION P-1449/03

by Bárbara Dührkop Dührkop (PSE) to the Commission

(16 April 2003)

Subject: Charging of fees to children of MEPs' assistants attending the European Schools

At a meeting held in Copenhagen on 28/29 April 1998, the Board of Governors of the European Schools decided, despite not having the support of the Commission, to classify the children of MEPs' assistants in Category III, thus obliging their parents to pay the full fees (for 2003-2004, EUR 1 886 for the pre-school level, EUR 2 622 for the primary level and EUR 3 578 for the secondary level).

The children of MEPs' assistants had previously been classified in Category I and were therefore exempted from the fees.

Despite the fact that this decision was taken by the Board of Governors of the European Schools, can the Commission, given that it has a representative on the Board, explain the latter's reasons for changing the long-established practice of classifying the children of MEPs' assistants in Category I?

As the Commission is aware, MEPs' assistants have their salaries paid directly from the EU budget: Section I (Parliament), Chapter 39 ('Expenditure relating to parliamentary assistants'), item 3 910 contains the appropriations for expenditure arising from the appointment and use of the services of one or more assistant(s). In addition, under Article 14 of the Rules governing the payment of expenses and allowances to Members, an assistant's contract of employment is agreed between either the MEP and the assistant or a paying agent and the assistant.