

Managing Diversity in Swiss Health Care: A Call to Action Bern, 19 September 2013

With 4 national languages, 26 independent cantons, and 23% foreigners, Switzerland has long been characterized by diversity. Swiss health care institutions are challenged by both an increasingly diverse patient population and a diverse workforce.

Health monitoring studies have revealed significant disparities in health and health care between migrants and Swiss nationals. In an effort to achieve equity in health, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) has promoted the development of "Migrant Friendly Hospitals MFH", or centers of excellence capable of identifying and addressing the needs of diverse patient populations. Five hospital groups have been funded under this initiative.

The development of Migrant Friendly hospitals is an important first step towards eliminating health care disparities in Switzerland and an important reminder to health policy makers and practitioners across the health care system of their responsibility to provide non-discriminatory, quality health care to all patients.

In order to build widespread and lasting commitment to health care equity in Switzerland, we invite you to join our Migrant Friendly network and respond to our Call to Action.

We call on our partners to:

1) Assure access to health care for all

Rationale:

- Access to and use of health care services by migrant patients is variable across Switzerland.
- Many health services in Switzerland are unprepared to identify and effectively address the needs of an increasingly diverse patient population.
- Low health literacy among many migrant patients contributes to poor understanding and use of the Swiss health care system.

Recommendations

- **Promote exchange among cantons regarding strategies to ensure equal access to health care for all.**
- **Strengthen the capacity of health services to identify and effectively respond to the needs of diverse patient populations.**
- **Ensure that health equity programs and projects include efforts to adapt health information for populations with low health literacy.**

2) Provide effective communication across language barriers

Rationale:

- Language barriers prevent effective communication, which is essential for ensuring quality care and patient safety.
- Professional interpreters (on-site and over-the-telephone) contribute to improved communication, but access to interpreter services is often limited and many health care workers lack training in how to work effectively with an interpreter.
Financing of interpreter services varies across cantons and among health care services, which contributes to disparities in quality of health care

Recommendations

- **Ensure that health professionals know when and why to work with professional interpreters, in order to make appropriate decisions concerning communication with allophone patients.**
- **Ensure that both health professionals and interpreters are trained in how best to collaborate to ensure quality and safety in health care for allophone patients.**
- **Develop a national-level solution for financing health care interpreting.**

3) Strengthen the cross-cultural competence of health care professionals

Rationale:

- In order to ensure equity in health care, health care professionals need to be able to communicate across patient-provider social, cultural and linguistic differences, and be able to identify and effectively respond to patients' diverse needs.

Recommendations

- **Make cultural competence training of health care professionals mandatory at both the pre-graduate and post-graduate training levels.**
- **Develop and require cultural competence training for all administrative staff with direct patient contact.**
- **Develop and evaluate innovative training methods for building cross cultural competency in health care.**

4) Promote research on diversity related topics

Rationale:

- Social and linguistic factors are often reasons for exclusion of migrant patients from research studies, due to the methodological challenges in conducting studies with diverse patient populations.
- As a result, there is a lack of data on the impact of social, cultural and linguistic diversity on health and health care in Switzerland.
- Such data are important for developing targeted interventions aimed at ensuring equity in health care for all patients.

Recommendations

- **Develop national level data collection systems and research projects to allow the analysis of the impact of social and linguistic factors on health and health care in Switzerland.**
- **Actively encourage clinical and health services researchers to include vulnerable and understudied populations in their research protocols.**
- **Give special emphasis to the development of interventions that address risk factors related to social and linguistic diversity, and that are relevant and feasible across a wide range of health service contexts.**

Please join us in working towards equity in health care for all by responding to our Call to Action in your daily practice!

For further information and contact details: www.swiss-mfh.ch

The MFH Program manager

