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Abstract Title:

The EU impact on patient care and workforce mobility in a small state. Challenges and opportunities in the treatment of cancer and rare diseases, and on patients' access to medicines

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Abstract

Research abstract

Background: Following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, as well as consistent demographic and political changes, healthcare systems across Europe face a number of raising challenges. While health remains the responsibility of member states, the influence of the European Union (EU) may be crucial in addressing such issues. This study aims to explore the EU impact on the Maltese health system, as well as the main opportunities and challenges faced at domestic level, by focusing on access to medicines, health care workforce mobility, cancer and rare diseases.

Methods: A qualitative study, based on semi-structured expert interviews (N = 10), was conducted in Malta. The four health policy topics investigated are: access to medicines, health care workforce mobility, cancer and rare diseases. The participants were purposely selected considering their individual profile, being renowned national experts on one of the four health topics identified, and actively involved in European level activities. The interviews, which lasted on average 1 hour, were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded and analysed with the support of Nvivo 11.

Results: The health system considered in this study faces specific challenges due to the fact that Malta is a small state. Reduced economic and human resources, small market and population, as well as lack of expertise emerged as salient issues. EU membership brought a number of changes on the four health topics considered, helping to overcome some of the structural problems. The experts perceive the EU influence regarding health care workforce mobility, cancer and rare diseases as beneficial. Networking, cooperation at European level and EU funds/funded projects were identified as essential mechanisms in enhancing these areas. On the other hand, the EU legal framework appeared to have negatively impacted access to medicines.

Conclusions: In general, the experts perceive the opportunities provided by the EU as beneficial, due to the limitations associated with being a small state. On the other hand, the EU legal framework does not seem to acknowledge the features of smaller states. Raising awareness on the needs of Small States and fostering cooperation at European level, appear essential for the enhancement of the Maltese health system.



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Message: The EU impact on small states' health systems is essential in light of small states specificities. The EU needs to acknowledge small states' specificities and challenges, by moving away from the "one size fits all" approach.