

VIEWPOINT



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What is the added value of cross-border cooperation in healthcare in your area?

The Centre hospitalier de Dunkerque and the Sint-Augustinuskliniek in Veurne are only fifteen kilometres from each other, and yet we still do not know each other very well. The cooperation that we are now implementing with all the project partners is very important in our view, and we have all worked together to define concrete study topics and areas of cooperation which should enable us to initiate substantial and lasting cooperation.

The main objective is above all to improve the conditions of, and access to, care for the patients. The sharing of costs, studies and human resources should enable us to do more and do it better. For example, by combining our two populations we can consider the acquisition of expensive and innovative equipment like the PET scan.

Another example is cooperation in accident and emergency services, which is part of our project. By organizing joint preparedness exercises and exchanging our know-how, we will be able to respond together more easily and more systematically.

Finally, we must emphasize the language problem and the need to encourage bilingualism in order to facilitate accessibility for French and Belgian patients. The establishment of substantial cooperation between our teams can only help to meet this need.

What do you think of the signing of the French-Belgian health agreement?

We are naturally pleased about this, and we hope that it will encourage cooperation. Administrative unwieldiness is still a real problem. This agreement should introduce a little more flexibility and encourage the recognition of "cross-border needs" in mentalities.

For us the agreement is a means rather than an end in itself. The initiatives at local level are real enough and just need to be facilitated.

“Flandre maritime - West-Vlaanderen hospital cooperation”

In 2004, the Centre Hospitalier de Dunkerque (Dunkirk hospital centre) and the Agence d'urbanisme et de développement de la région Flandre-Dunkerque (Flanders-Dunkirk area urban planning and development agency) decided to open a dialogue with Belgian establishments located near the border, within an 80 km radius, in order to examine the opportunities for collaboration. Potential synergies were soon identified, and the partners observed that cross-border cooperation could enable them to find solutions to common problems.

In 2005, the “Flandre maritime - West-Vlaanderen hospital cooperation” project was approved by the Interreg steering committee. It involves the Centre Hospitalier de Dunkerque, Nucléridis¹, the Sint-Augustinuskliniek in Veurne and the Koningin Elisabeth Instituut in Oostduinkerke.

Five priority action areas have been defined:

- Nuclear medicine, with a study on the feasibility of a cross-border facility, “PET scan”, an advanced imaging technique, useful in areas including oncology but difficult to implement: the high cost, the scarcity of competencies and the policy of uniform geographical coverage have subjected the acquisition of such equipment to strict allocation criteria. The setting-up of a cross-border cooperation framework seems to be the only way to consider the eventual acquisition of this device.

- Physiotherapy, with the setting-up of a working group on the subject. The Centre Hospitalier de Dunkerque is seeking facilities



to accept patients needing physiotherapy (neurological and post-trauma rehabilitation) and the Koningin Elisabeth Instituut has capacity available to treat more patients.

- Critical care units, with coordination of treatment and admission procedures: personnel exchange and information, joint disaster exercises, coordination of response protocols, etc.

- Training of student nurses and exchange of medical, paramedical and administrative personnel in order to enrich and share knowledge of all participants (opening of new training areas, development of specific courses, etc.).

- Communication and the promotion of the cooperation both to the general public and to healthcare professionals.

The four institutions participating in this project are planning to sign a cross-border cooperation agreement² at the beginning of 2006 in order to formalize their partnership and proceed with more operational implementation of all these actions.

(1) Private-sector company specializing in medical imaging.

(2) Refer to the special report on page 2 on the signature of the French-Belgian framework agreement on cross-border health cooperation.

French-Swiss “Cross-border education forum”

The “Cross-border education forum” association was established in 1993 to encourage cooperation between state-and private-sector education practitioners in the Swiss cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Valais, the French departments of Ain and Haute-Savoie and the Aosta valley in Italy who wanted to share their professional experiences and dialogue across the borders.

Backed by the Conseil du Léman, the forum aims to meet the challenges of education in the border areas. Each year it organizes a meeting, held alternately in a state or private establishment and in turn on each side of the various borders, bringing together establishment directors, teachers and guidance counsellors.

The 11th forum meeting was held on Saturday, 26 November, 2005, in Annemasse, Haute-Savoie, on the topic “The place of cross-border actions in education”.

Following a presentation given by the head of the MOT's “Training” project on the sites of initial and continuing education at the borders, a round table gave the participants an opportunity to discuss cross-border educational projects developed on the French-Italian-Swiss border.

The projects presented during this round table included the “Cross-border education cooperation” project. Supported by European funding from September 2004 to December 2006 as part of the INTERREG III A Alcotra programme, this project enables the Aosta Valley (Autonomous region - Education and Culture Council) and Haute-Savoie (department council and education inspectorate) to develop a broad range of joint education actions: class exchanges, education personnel training (this year on innovative practices in the area of language teaching), company internships as part of initial training, setting-up of a working group on competency validation, etc. The participants took away with them a large number of ideas.

Signature of a French-Belgian cross-border health agreement

A framework agreement on cross-border health cooperation was signed on 30 September, 2005, by the French and Belgian health ministers, enabling the signing of cross-border agreements between healthcare and prevention establishments¹ wanting to cooperate with their counterparts on the other side of the border. The framework agreement defines the legal framework within which French-Belgian cross-border health cooperation operates, with the aim of:

- providing better access to high-quality healthcare for the populations of the border area,
- guaranteeing healthcare continuity for these populations,
- optimizing the organization of healthcare provision by facilitating the use or the sharing of human and equipment resources,
- encouraging the pooling of knowledge and practices.

More specifically, the agreement empowers local partners (in France the regional hospital agencies, health insurance funds and health and welfare directorates, and in Belgium the insurers, healthcare establishments and the INAMI [national health and disability insurance institute]) to sign cooperation agreements, which must define the mandatory terms and procedures for intervention by these entities and for patient management.

The geographical area covered by the agreement encompasses the Champagne-Ardenne, Lorraine, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardie regions in France and the border districts of Veurne, Ieper, Kortrijk, Mouscron, Tournai, Ath, Mons, Thuin, Philippeville, Dinant, Neufchâteau, Virton and Arlon in Belgium. It applies to any person entitled to French or Belgian health insurance benefits and residing or staying in this area.

The agreement that has been signed is a significant step forward for French-Belgian cooperation, which is particularly vigorous in the healthcare sector. The Belgian border has the highest concentration of cross-border actions and projects between France and its neighbouring countries, and certain stretches of the border have been the subject of particularly innovative judicial experiments (the *Thiérache Santé - Transcard*² project, for example). The agreement meets a major need, giving the partners in the field a new freedom of operation enabling them to go further in the implementation of their projects.

The agreement also provides major advances for the patients. The health and healthcare access systems are state responsibilities, which obliges health insurance beneficiaries to obtain prior medical authorization from the medical advisor of their insurance provider. Several rulings of the ECJ in 1998 (in particular the Kohll and Decker rulings) determined that only out-patient care could be provided without such authorization. The French-Belgian agreement goes further, since it also enables patients to receive in-patient care anywhere within the area covered, without needing prior authorization, as long as they fall within the scope of a specific agreement. Note that for border workers and the members of their families, certain regulations already granted specific authorizations². It should also be emphasized that, since 1981, Belgium has implemented an INAMI circular which authorizes access to healthcare without prior authorization for patients living less than 15 km from the border on the Belgian side and receiving care less than 25 km from the border on the French side.

The agreement will come into effect when it is ratified by the two states, which is expected early in 2006. It is a strong signal to the partners in the field and should give additional impetus to the French-Belgian cross-border health cooperation which is already well under way.

(1) *Hospitals, health insurance entities, establishments for elderly and handicapped persons, other health and prevention centres.*

(2) *For further information, see Cahiers de la MOT no. 4 on cross-border health cooperation (available on the MOT web site www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org) and the "Health" section of the web site (french version).*

■ A seminar on transport in January 2006

The MOT, Lille Métropole Communauté Urbaine (Lille metropolitan area urban community) and the Ministry of Infrastructure are organizing a research-action seminar on 27 January, 2006, in Lille on cross-border public transport of passengers.

Its objectives are to encourage networking of cross-border mobility and public transport entities, list their difficulties and their needs, discuss successful experiments and outline proposals for actions to improve their day-to-day cross-border cooperation at the service of the inhabitants of the cross-border living areas.

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■ Setting-up of a French-Belgian parliamentary working group

On 10 November, 2005, the prefect of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region and the representatives of the embassies of Belgium and France officially approved the establishment of a French-Belgian working group comprising six French members of parliament and six Belgian members of parliament. The task of this working group is to define the content and the implementation procedures of the right to experiment¹ for the Lille metropolitan area regarding cross-border cooperation (CIADT [interministerial regional planning and development committee] of 18 December 2003). The French authorities proposed to their Belgian counterparts the setting-up of this working group as a means of discussion between the two countries, its tasks including identification of the legislative and regulatory obstacles to cooperation and the proposal of solutions. It is scheduled to submit its conclusions in 2007.

(1) *Right granted to local authorities as part of the decentralization policy (act of 21 July 2003).*

In the press in November

- **There aren't any mountains between Pas-de-Calais and Kent**, *La Voix du Nord*, 9 November
"The French department and the English county have signed a cooperation agreement protocol. And it's not just words. The cooperation agreement [...] has this ambition. [...] The programmes aim to improve the interchanges in these areas: rail links, schools, cultural cooperation, sports, illegal immigration, tourism, centres of excellence."
- **Luxembourg: in-depth analysis of the cross-border worker**, *Le Républicain lorrain*, 1 November
"Over the last twenty years, employment in Luxembourg has increased from 161,000 to more than 300,000 persons. At the moment 115,000 employees are cross-border residents from neighbouring countries: 21% from Germany, 27.2% from Belgium and 51.8% from France"...
- **Canton tax on the income of cross-border workers: 71.5% in Geneva, 28.5% in the border area**, *Communiqué DF*, 16 November
"The Canton of Geneva has paid financial compensation to the French departments of Ain and Haute Savoie [...]. This charge amounts to 64,082,334 [Swiss] francs for the second half of 2004 and, based on an estimate, 74,273,065 francs for the first half of 2005."
- **France-Monaco agreements - Albert II and Chirac sign for the future**, *Nice Matin*, 9 November
"8 November will mark an historic turning point in relations between France and Monaco. [...] The three texts change the situation in terms of administrative, financial and judicial cooperation" ...
- **The Perthus tunnel-boring machine is advancing "at very high speed"**, *Le Moniteur*, 26 November
"At Perthus, in the Pyrenees, work on the construction of the railway tunnel is not waiting for the arrival of the TGV high-speed train to progress "at very high speed". According to TP Ferro managers, the tunnel is advancing into the mountain at an average of 20 to 25 metres per day."
- **A new motorway of the sea opens on Monday**, *Le Figaro économie*, 10 November
"A new motorway of the sea is scheduled for inauguration on Monday between Tangiers and Port-Vendres, with the turnaround of the first roll-on/roll-off ship from Morocco, the Perpignan chamber of trade and industry (CCI) and the Pyrénées-Orientales department council announced yesterday."