

The Nordic Medical Council

## Primary health care at the heart of Nordic health care

A revitalized and strong primary health care is essential in keeping our health care systems sustainable in the decades ahead.

The Nordic health care systems are under increasing pressure. Populations are aging, costs are rising and patient demands are growing. In all Nordic countries, the division of resources during the last 20 years has favored hospital care. With these conditions, which are only expected to intensify, guiding patients towards the right treatment at the right time is an increasingly important goal – as is implementing appropriate standards of early intervention and risk reduction without inducing over-diagnosis or over-treatment.

There is strong scientific evidence that high-quality primary care is associated with better health outcomes, lower costs, and greater equality in health. Access to patient-focused, comprehensive and coordinated services provided by general practitioners (GP) and their teams remains the proven basis of primary care in both industrialized and developing countries.

This is why political decision makers should promote the development of an adequately staffed and resourced primary health care sector.

Currently, there is a significant lack of GPs – especially in rural areas – which has negative consequences for individual patients and for the health care system as a whole.

### **Primary care promotes equality, continuity and coordination**

Often, the local GP is the patient's initial contact with the health care system as well as a constant anchorperson. Through GPs, the whole population has the possibility of an informal and unthreatening access to the health care system. Equal access for all is a core value in all Nordic countries.

Continuity of care is also at the heart of general practice and is associated with better outcomes and fewer resources spent. Firstly, the health care system must ensure the possibility for the patient to choose his or her GP. Over time, GPs get to know their patients, their medical histories and their relations, networks and abilities as well as other underlying issues that may have influenced their health. This knowledge contributes to optimized and individualized diagnosis and treatment. Secondly, the health care system should define the continuous and comprehensive responsibility of the individual GP through an enrollment (list) system.

Due to their continuous relationships with patients, GPs are uniquely positioned to address one of the greatest challenges of modern health care systems: integrating and co-ordinating the activities that go into helping each individual patient. GPs thus counteract the ever-increasing fragmentation of specialized health care and community care for disabled, frail and elderly citizens.

### **Primary medical care promotes efficiency**

GPs promote efficiency directly by performing a significant share of the annual medical treatments in the health care system. They also promote efficiency indirectly by making sure that patients are referred appropriately to specialist assessment and treatment (only) when this is required.

In this way, GPs are at the center of maintaining the balance between, on the one hand, providing all citizens with access to medical services and, on the other hand, making sure that health care budgets are spent most effectively.

**Decision makers must strengthen and develop primary health care**

The Nordic Medical Council urges political decision makers throughout the Nordic region to keep in mind all of the abovementioned ways in which primary health care and GPs support accessible, efficient and interconnected health care systems in our region.

For future Nordic patients, it is paramount that decision makers facilitate a strengthening of the primary care sector and prioritize adequate resources for its continual development, including education and research.



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