

## Innovation at any price?

It is now 10 years since London family doctor James le Fanu published his review of medicine since World War II. In a remarkable book, he picks out what really moved medicine forward in that 50 years or so [1]. But the title itself makes it clear: the age of optimism is at an end. Dr Le Fanu notes four paradoxes. Firstly, doctors have become disillusioned: in the eyes of many, medicine is no longer as satisfying as it was. Secondly, with medicine more successful than ever, the proportion of the public who are 'worried' about their health has increased. Thirdly, the popularity of alternative medicine is soaring. Fourthly, concerning the spiralling costs of health care: here the paradox is the law of diminishing returns. Dr Le Fanu cites the almost doubling of health expenditure in the US over a 10-year period from Euros 288 billion to Euros 491 billion at the end of the 20th century. In 2010, Laurance comments in *The Lancet*: "How can the world's leading industrial nation tolerate a health system with costs rocketing out of control, 50 million citizens uninsured and among the highest levels of avoidable deaths in the developed world. Ford Motor Company spends more on health care than on steel, as Starbucks spends more on health care than on coffee" [2].

Ten years after Dr Le Fanu's book, how is Europe faring? The OECD uses purchasing power parity per inhabitant to compare countries. In 2007 it stunningly ranged from Euros 3,240 on health care per inhabitant in Norway to a low of Euros 760 in Poland (with the US on Euros 5,340 per citizen). Spending is highest in northern and western Europe (Euros 2,200–2,900) and least in southern and eastern Europe (average Euros 2,190 per inhabitant per year). Annual growth rates also vary considerably. Countries apparently well in control (<5% growth per year) were Austria, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. At the high end (>9% average growth rate over the past 10 years) were Greece, Ireland, Spain and UK [3].

And what did we get for all that money? Is longevity a good measure? On average across OECD countries, life expectancy at birth reached 79.1 years in 2007, a gain of more than 10 years since 1960. Across countries, higher health spending per capita is generally associated with higher life expectancy. But still it varies: Spain has higher (81.1 years), while Denmark and Hungary have lower life expectancies (78.4 and 73.3 years respectively) than would be predicted by their GDP per capita. Another measure might be breast cancer mortality, because then quality of health care comes into play, as discussed in *Eur J Pharm Prac*. 2009;15(4):18. Strikingly, in 2007, Denmark, one of the highest European healthcare spenders (Euros 2,600 per citizen), had the highest breast cancer mortality (29.5/100,000 females) while the Spanish figures were 16.7/100,000 females for Euros 1,950 per citizen.

It is clear that pouring more money into the healthcare system is not the only answer: where should we put our Euros? At the 2010 EAHP congress in Nice (France) we will meet novelties in therapy, care and practice. We cannot afford innovation at any price: how can hospital pharmacists make the best choice? In the upcoming issue of *EJHP Practice* we feature *Pharmacoeconomics* as our cover story. Led by a research group from Leuven University (Belgium), *EJHP Practice* has developed a scorecard to evaluate scientific papers that assess the cost-effectiveness of a treatment or healthcare intervention, with the non-expert hospital pharmacist in mind. We are grateful to Amgen Europe GmbH for support with an unrestricted educational grant. At the congress a special symposium will be devoted to this project. In the upcoming issue of *EJHP Practice* the guest editor from the *Pharmacoeconomics* editorial series, Professor Frans Rutten, will also contribute a commentary on the societal merits of innovation in health care. One of the disappointing conclusions is that despite all our efforts we still lack the instruments to pinpoint where to best invest our healthcare money.

For the fortunate attending the jubilee 15th EAHP congress in Nice: we hope you have an inspiring congress and take home the best ideas. And for the less lucky ones: do not worry, in the next issue of *EJHP Practice* we will report all the highlights.



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### References

1. Le Fanu J. *The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine*. Carroll & Graf Publishers, New York. 2000.
2. Laurance J. The Beckham test. *Lancet*. 2010;375:631.
3. Health at a glance 2009: OECD Indicators. Available from: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)