



Patient empowerment

To make an impact on healthcare policy-, law-, and decision-making patients must be empowered to choose, participate, and influence these decisional mechanisms. IAPO looks at knowledge as an enabling factor of successful and effective patient empowerment. In this briefing IAPO provides an overview of how patients can build the knowledge that is needed to empower them to choose how to be best involved in healthcare processes.

Introduction

IIAPO's [Declaration on patient-centred healthcare](#) describes a strong connection between empowerment and choice. Patients must be empowered in order to exercise their right to make informed healthcare choices and have a meaningful say in policy- and decision-making.

Empowerment through patients' ability to choose, participate, and influence is deeply dependent on good patient knowledge. In this policy briefing, IAPO sets the scene for the forthcoming Patient Solidarity Day and outlines the most urgent challenges and opportunities that are associated with advocating for patient empowerment.

Definition

An empowered patient is a patient that does not look at him/herself only as a user of health services. Rather, empowered patients are recognised as partners within their health environment. Recognising patients as partners involves creating real opportunities to contribute the unique knowledge that one develops by being a patient. There have been various interpretations of the term 'patient empowerment', with different views on what defines it and how it manifests itself. However, three key dimensions of patient empowerment can be identified ([Fumagalli et al., 2015](#)):

- **Empowerment as a process** by which patients become more knowledgeable and aware of their conditions and take control over their healthcare journey ([Aujoulat et al., 2008](#)). In this context, information and education become enabling factors of patient empowerment.
- **Empowerment as a state** whereby patients develop "an ability to make autonomous, informed decisions" ([Anderson and Funnel, 2010](#)).
- **Empowered behaviours** which involve adopting a proactive mindset whereby patients can be in control of their health and healthcare decisions.

Key resources

There is an acknowledgment that patient engagement and involvement plays a key role in improving the quality of healthcare globally, and the concept of patient empowerment builds upon this. A strong example for this approach is the Patients for Patients Safety Programme, led by the World Health Organization. This programme aims to empower patient communities to play an active role in patient safety, and does so by providing essential information and opportunities of engagement. This provides further evidence of the key role of knowledge in the empowerment process.

Policy-makers at the European level also recognise that information and empowerment go hand in hand. In fact, in the European Union (EU) Council Recommendation of 9 June 2009 on patient safety ([2009/C 151/01](#)), the Council urged EU Member States to “empower” and “inform” European patients by creating opportunities of involvement at all decision-making levels and informing them about standards of patient safety, regulations, and complaint routes available in each country.

Unsurprisingly, the topic of patient empowerment also features highly on patient advocates’ agendas. In May 2015, the **European Patients’ Forum (EPF)** launched the [Patient Empowerment Campaign](#). This campaign described five “E”s that constitute patient empowerment: education, expertise, equality, experience, engagement. EPF also developed a [Charter on patient empowerment](#), a key “advocacy and political tool to promote actions on the ground and at policy level”.

Advocating for patient empowerment

- Regardless of whether one looks at empowerment as a process, state, or mind-set, there is one important element to consider when planning and developing advocacy activities: patient empowerment should not be assumed. Patients themselves are the true driving force behind their own empowerment. Advocating effectively for patient empowerment requires paying adequate attention to various factors that might facilitate or impede the empowerment process.

- **Patient empowerment strategies must take into account regional differences and the diversity of patient communities’ needs.** The nature of empowerment strategies must be determined by the specific characteristics of the health environment in which patients operate. Some regions (e.g. Europe) provide more opportunities for patients to develop a strong profile as empowered actors in healthcare. In other regions, patient empowerment manifests itself in other ways, with different priorities. For example, at IAPO’s 2017 [African Regional Meeting](#) it was shown that patient empowerment in medicines regulation in Africa relies on key institutions and decision-making bodies becoming open to listening to patients’ voices.
- **With knowledge comes power.** Patients and patient advocates can empower themselves by developing a stronger understanding of what their rights and responsibilities are as patients. Only if patients have knowledge of what their rights are will they be able to effectively advocate for their fulfillment. Equally, by being aware of their responsibilities, patients will be able to engage in constructive dialogue with other stakeholders and make a contribution to improve healthcare and patient-centricity. However, to achieve this, patients must have self-confidence in their unique skills, such as their knowledge of what it is like to live with a condition, and how to best put them into use. Patients must also strengthen their ability to recognise opportunities of engagement, such as the possibility to take part in research processes or consultations aimed at eliciting patients’ views.

Looking ahead: #PSD2017

Patient Solidarity Day (PSD) will take place on Saturday 2nd December 2017 and will be an opportunity for patient communities worldwide to come together and carry out advocacy activities around the theme:

Globally Empowered Patients: Power through Knowledge.

Knowledge is at the heart of patient empowerment and empowered patients have a crucial role to play in the process of knowledge building. Patients must be active and take appropriate steps to make sure their knowledge builds on high-quality, robust information. Only if this condition is met will patients be able to be involved as empowered, independent, credible actors in healthcare decision-making. Knowledge empowers patients to choose.