Horizon 2020 and the need to reinvent health technology development

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Commenting on the €80 billion Horizon 2020 research programme, Kieran Walshe and colleagues (Aug 24, p 668) urge European Parliamentarians to reconsider the role health services and policy research can have in times of financial hardship. Like Walshe and colleagues, we doubt the value of a narrow interpretation of the health and wealth agenda that fosters patentable and marketable technological advances. The irony of continued reliance on an economic development model that is so dependent on speculative markets and the deep pockets of public purchasers has to be highlighted.

Further, because health services and policy research can help us rethink health technology development, Parliamentarians would be wise to support raising its share of the health research budget from 4% to 25%. Since the late 1980s, health technology development has been driven by an economic logic that is part and parcel of the current crisis. In the pursuit of short-term financial growth, government policy and stock markets have supported a research and development boom in biotechnologies and pharmaceuticals, ignoring the growing dissonance between profitable technologies and the needs of patients and health systems for affordable, cost-effective, clinically relevant, and user responsive innovations. While the economy might have supported costly and misaligned research and development processes through the late 1990s, not a single health-care system can today afford each and every new medical innovation brought to market. There has never been a better time to rethink what principles should underlie health technology development.

Expertise in health services and policy research can help us design brilliant technologies by explaining what makes certain technologies superior from a health-care system perspective. Technology design processes usually begin with identifying a value proposition latent in the new technology—that is the value it will create for users. For example, chronically ill patients might appreciate a monitoring device that is discrete, portable, energy efficient, and that makes a difference in their daily lives by extending their ability to detect and act on a serious physiological imbalance. Medical specialists might, on the other hand, prefer a device that registers and downloads from a distance a large amount of clinically relevant data. Different users often desire different latent attributes. Hence, health technology developers need to be told explicitly what health-care systems' needs and challenges are and how to address them wisely.

Health services and policy research can serve the twin goals of health and wealth, but the economic crisis should encourage creative reinvention not repetition.
References


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