

Foreword

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The system of health insurance is an important element in the debate about the future organization of Belgium. It is a focal point in the discussion about the limits of solidarity, the existence of different preferences in the North and the South of the country, and the possible increase (or decrease) in efficiency that may be realized through decentralization. At the same time, the organization of health care is one of the most important challenges facing all rich Western countries. How to accommodate the trend towards increasing expenditures as a result of technical progress, in a situation with growing doubts about the long-run sustainability of government expenditures?

The lead piece of this E-book (by Carine Van de Voorde and myself) argues that the issue of decentralization cannot be analysed separately, but should be integrated in a broader perspective on the future organization of the health care system. Decentralization is desirable, but regional decentralization is only one option. An alternative option is to give more responsibility to the sickness funds and cautiously move in the direction of a model of regulated competition. In both cases the financing of the system should remain at the federal level and personal solidarity is reached through a risk-adjusted distribution of the global budget. Basically all European countries are variants of this general model. The key difference is the role of sickness funds in the system – and this is also the key question for Belgium.

The lead piece is followed by four “Belgian” reactions. Three of them (by David Crainich, Jan De Maeseneer and Johan Kips) have been presented at the Re-Bel Public Event in December 2010. The fourth (by Myriam De Spiegelaere), with special attention for the specific situation in Brussels, is written for this E-book. The E-book also includes three contributions from countries with very different health care systems: Erik Schut describes the Dutch system of regulated competition, Fred Schroyen the regional decentralization in the Norwegian health care system, which is dominated by the government, Brigitte Dormont the growing tensions within the hybrid French system. They all draw some lessons for Belgium. Finally, there is a brief reply by the authors of the lead piece.