

11.1. European Public Health Care Systems and Institutional-Organisational Change

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Paper proposal: The French health system: the never-ending struggle for cost-containment

For the last thirty years, the French national health insurance system has been struggling with mounting deficits and the financial imbalance of the Social Security has been the focal point of most of political attention in the field of health care. Together with some organizational and health-oriented changes, governments have thus successively implemented various cost-containment measures, in a bid to solve the financial difficulties of the public sickness insurance funds. Three stages could be highlighted in this continuous stream of reforms. The first phase consisted during the 70-80's in freezing Social Security tariffs in order to curb health care expenses. It however did not work since professionals were able to increase activity to compensate for frozen tariffs. Hence governments turned to increasing co-payments for curbing public health care expenses. In the second phase, starting in the early 90's, the government negotiated with – and then imposed upon – health care practitioners to limit the cost of medical treatment. In the meanwhile, without so much success as sanctions were not imposable on doctors. A third sequence emerged in the last decade with more structural attempts at increasing the control and regulatory capabilities of the State over the financing and the planning of the health care system. This paper sheds light on the past reforms and discusses new stakes for measuring the performance of the French health care system: while cost-containment and curbing public deficits have been the main rationale of the reforms, additional concerns about the quality – despite flattering international comparisons – and about the equity of the health insurance system have emerged, questioning more broadly the efficiency of the French 'regulatory health care state' in managing the financial sustainability, the quality, the responsiveness and the equality of the health care system.