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ЕВРОПЕЙСКА АСОЦИАЦИЯ НА СТАРШИТЕ БОЛНИЧНИ ЛЕКАРИ**

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## REPORT ON THE BULGARIAN HEALTHCARE

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Dear Colleagues,

Healthcare in Bulgaria is insufficiently funded. Public funding for 2007 is EUR 1.133 billion, representing 4.3% of the GDP, of which EUR 715 million – from the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) and the rest – from the state budget.

It is a political speculation to say that the reason for the funding to be 4.3% is that the country is poor. Similar comparisons should be made for the amounts allotted per head of the population (in Bulgaria – EUR 147), where the difference between Bulgaria and the other European countries is up to 20 times. Bulgaria distributes through the budget about 42% of the GDP. What is the percentage allotted for healthcare is a matter of priorities. For the Bulgarian government healthcare is evidently not a priority, and what is more, it is on the last place in the political agenda. The salaries of those working in the budget-funded sector of healthcare are the lowest for the whole budget-funded sphere – under 200 Euros.

For a year now certain circles from the governing majority attempt to abolish the contractual principles. That process was finalized at the end of 2006. In the course of 3 months the NHIF practically only simulated negotiations, with the Act on the HNIF Budget, in breach of the Bulgarian Constitution the Health Insurance Act was amended to enable the NHIF to unilaterally define prices, volumes and order for rendering medical services. The NHIF in Bulgaria is a monopolistic body within the system of obligatory health insurance, and therefore may not define such prices, volumes and order. In this case the National Framework Contract performs regulatory functions.

Such serious issues require political decision generated as a result of public debate and shaped according to the respective conceptual framework to achieve clear and motivated amendments to the respective basic laws, in this case – the Health Insurance Act. In practice, however, this was effected through the Act on the HNIF Budget, drafted and submitted by the Council of the NHIF, in which the only political figure is the Council Chairman, who is as well Healthcare Vice-Minister – Emil Raynov.

As a consequence of the brutal and incompetent political interference, the system found itself in a state of regulatory chaos, featuring contradictions between major laws and sub-laws and decisions of the Council of the NHIF. In the beginning of this year for a month the NHIF was not able to conclude contracts and to make payments. Grave legislative infringements are made through decisions contradicting to the national laws. In the course of 3 months there was tension in the system, which is expected to escalate again in case of lowering the prices for the medical services, which the NHIF usurped the right to do unilaterally. For a year now permanent reduction of the incomes of the physicians and nurses is witnessed, particularly for those working in hospitals. A higher trend is witnessed of labour emigration among physicians, and especially among nurses, as well as clear indications of lack of certain medical professionals.

All that caused huge indignation among the physicians and the health professionals. Meetings were held of the leadership of the Bulgarian Medical Association with physicians all over the country. On February 14<sup>th</sup> the BMA organized National Conference on Healthcare Problems. On February 15<sup>th</sup>, together with the Association of the Nurses a large National Protest Meeting was organized in the capital-city attended by over 10,000 physicians and nurses. Protests were also held at different parts of the country, as well as one-hour “warning protest activities”. Our main demands are:

- immediate restoration of the contractual principle;
- restoration of the public nature of the NHIF and lifting of the political and governmental control over the Fund;
- administrative and political liability of the individuals who are responsible for the established regulatory chaos and strain within the system, for the breaches of the laws and the administrative arbitrariness.
- ensuring of adequate funding of the system amounting to not less than 6% of the GDP.

In the meantime the opposition made use of the strain and requested vote of non-confidence of the Government because of the healthcare crisis.

Regretfully we have so far not received any adequate reply to our requests, neither a meeting was appointed to discuss them. We requested such meeting with the Prime-Minister. However, the attempts of some circles from the governing Bulgarian Socialist Party to destroy our professional organization are still continuing. A draft-law was submitted by their MPs aiming to cancel the self-regulatory functions of the BMA and to transfer them to administrative structures. Similar ideas exist as well with respect to the CME organized by the Association. Meetings are being held with administratively subordinated state hospital directors for the purpose of political speculation with the public opinion.

Due to that, as of the middle of March the BMA and the Bulgarian Association of the Nurses announced that they are ready for effective protest activities.

Some positive effects, however, resulted from the conducted protests. In the first place, a debate was opened for continuation of the healthcare reforms. Regretfully, the positions of the three parties within the governing coalition are very different, and in practice the system is governed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. For two years now there is no clear strategy for the sector; the reforms are not only blocked, but retrograde ideas emerge for centralization and administrative budgeting.

A month ago the Constitutional Court abolished the amendment to the law made in the end of the last year, as being anti-constitutional and in practice restored the contractual principle. Regretfully the ruling cannot be enforced retrospectively and it does not solve the problem for the current year.

The admittance of the BMA to membership of all major European medical organizations indicates that the organization has undergone development and practically functions as a medical chamber. The Association will continue to actively defend the interests of its members, which in this case coincide with the interests of the patients and the public. The Bulgarian Medical Association counts on active support of the European professional organizations in order to defend its positions.