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ASSOCIAZIONE EUROPEA DEI MEDICI OSPEDALIERI
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ΕΒΡΟΠΕΪΣΚΑ ΑΣΟЦΙΑЦΙΑ НА СТАРШИТЕ БОЛНИЧНИ ЛЕКАРИ
ASOCIATIA EUROPEANA A MEDICILOR DIN SPITALE**

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Slovakia – The Medical Protest 2011

Health care in Slovakia is expected to be of high quality and accessible to every citizen. The Slovak national health care system is based on solidarity. Payments are compulsory for everybody. The state pays for economically inactive citizens. There are three health insurance funds, the biggest one is owned by the state. All of them are joint stock companies making profit. Generally, Slovak health care is characterized by poor funding and low level of management. It is estimated that up to 30% of resources are used inefficiently. The health care sector is still under strong political influence and every new minister brings new directors to state hospitals.

Moreover, the system of payment for inpatients health care does not reflect its real costs and covers approximately only 70% of them. Health insurance funds pay a fixed amount of money for every patient admitted and treated in the given department, no matter what kind of treatment/management is needed. This is the reason why private hospitals tend to get rid of 'expensive' patients and send them to state hospitals. It has resulted in an increasing debt of state hospitals. The Ministry of Health Care has therefore started the process of DRG system creation since spring 2011. Its full implementation is a task of many years.

The long-term underinvestment in the health care sector, poor working conditions and low salaries of hospital doctors in Slovakia have caused considerable emigration of Slovak doctors. More than one thousand Slovak doctors are working in the Czech Republic; hundreds are seeking better jobs in Austria, Germany, The United Kingdom, Ireland etc. Therefore the Slovak Medical Chamber together with other medical organisations asked the Slovak Government and Ivan Uhliarik, the Minister of Health Care, for making steps to reverse the process.

Without prior discussions with health professionals Minister Uhliarik claimed an intention to transform all state hospitals into state-owned joint stock companies. Medical organisations considered this step dangerous especially with regard to keeping accessibility of acute hospital care. Under the suggested 'odd' system of payments for hospitalisation all the acute hospitals owned by the state would run into higher debts. The in-debt joint stock companies that function in accordance with the Commercial Code would become an easy subject to bankrupt. Hospitals could be easily taken over by the large capital groups which already own health insurance funds, several smaller hospitals and even a network of pharmacies.

This was the trigger for the protest. Labour Union of Physicians (LUP) warned the Government not to issue the Act on transformation of hospitals into public limited companies. 3827 hospital doctors confirmed by their signatures that they were ready to resign. Despite doctors' protest the Slovak Parliament adopted the abovementioned Act and the two sides faced off.

At the end of September 2011 as many as 2411 doctors handed in their resignations as a means of achieving their demands. The reasons for this step are summarised in the following four points:

1. Violations of the Slovak Work Regulations and EC Directive in certain aspects of working time
2. Long-term underinvestment in the health care sector in Slovakia
3. Undervaluation of the remuneration for hospital doctors
4. Transformation of public hospitals into Public Limited Companies

Two months remained for negotiations. The Minister of Health Care pretended discussions with doctors but in the meantime he actually started to fight against them. After that a massive campaign started in the mass media and mainly young doctors became a subject for intimidation in some hospitals. The negotiations between the Government and LUP stopped completely in the middle of November. At this point the Slovak Medical Chamber started to act. After the intervention of Prof. Dragula, SMC president, both sides reopened negotiations. The aim was the adoption of Memorandum between the Government and LUP.

At the end of November, due to strong pressure from hospitals, many doctors took back their resignations. However, around 1600 doctors did not change their standpoint. In that time the Prime Minister Iveta Radičová announced the State of emergency but competent authorities were unable to deliver the decrees to all of the involved doctors. On 1 December 2011 around 1200 doctors left. It resulted in a manpower crisis in hospitals – some of them were on sick leave, some went abroad etc. Under these stressful circumstances both sides finally came to agreement and signed Memorandum.

The situation was complicated by the fact that the right Slovakian coalition government lost its majority after losing a vote on extending the European Stability Fund. The vote was later passed. The government will remain in office in a caretaker capacity until fresh elections in March of this year. As a result the Government could not guarantee adopting some bullet points from Memorandum with the Parliament. Therefore, doctors stayed alert until the adoption of the two laws by the Parliament.

It is important to emphasise that in contrast to minister Uhliarik, doctors carefully controlled the situation in Slovak hospitals. No patient suffered any harm. Doctors were prepared to cover all emergency services in hospitals even if there wouldn't have been any state of emergency. The only undesirable effect of the protest was postponing of several elective operations.

Doctors do not consider the result of the protest their victory; it is rather the first step to improve the current relations in the health care sector. In contrast, the Minister of Health Care and the Government cannot put up with the result. They already forwarded the Parliament a new law in which they suggest punishments for doctors in case of disobedience. Doctors could be imprisoned for up to 5 years, their registration could be abolished for 10 years and also financial fines are rather high. The Slovak Medical Chamber has already appealed to the members of Parliament not to adopt such a law.

Moreover, the minister Uhliarik announced that he wanted to accept up to 300 unqualified doctors from the Ukraine.

The Slovak Medical Chamber is proud of the doctors who were able to show their moral and ethical superiority and hopes that the culture of power will disappear from the political life in Slovakia in the near future.

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to the colleagues from all Europe for their support.

Mikulas Buzgo, vice-president SMC, Bratislava 25 January 2012

