

Editor's Page

Medicine and a Country in Decline

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Greece is going through its worst crisis since the Second World War and the Civil War period that followed. We are living through a financial crisis, a crisis of values, of institutions, of application of the laws and regulatory standards. Medicine, as a practice, as a science, and as a vocation, cannot escape the consequences.

During the last 30 years, the quality of Greek physicians has declined to an incredible degree, while at the same time the number of doctors registered with the country's medical associations has increased excessively beyond all reason. It is precisely these metrics that betray how low the crisis has brought us.

Greece is a country with 11 million inhabitants and, based on Portugal, the Czech Republic, and Belgium, which have similar-sized populations, it should have about 42,000 physicians. However, the insatiable thirst of many families to have children in the medical profession has led to today's reality of 75,000 physicians. In other words, there are a surplus 33,000 professionals who have passed through the filters of the system, ending up in the medical association of their choice with a recognised medical degree. They are a very mixed bunch. Graduates with an exemplary study record; graduates with little learning ability, who have pursued their career ambitions, God knows how, down the obscure corridors of some medical schools; graduates who have been judged equally qualified as members of the continually expanding European Union.

Theoretically, if there was such a person as an Ombudsman for Reason and Meritocracy, it would be easy to raise major objections and arguments in order to protect and ensure the self-evident requirements: quality and merit. Unfortunately,

Greece lacks an Ombudsman for Reason and Meritocracy. Inevitably, all the deserving and talented, those who traditionally constitute the life force of each nation in the eternal struggle of nations, states, and civilisations, have been undermined and overlooked.

Any objective observer of developments in the field of health care and the National Health System in Greece over the last 30 years has to acknowledge a significant number of positive actions that have contributed to the better medical care of the Greek patient. That is true; that is a fact. Through the policies of the government during the period 1980-2000, mainly via the development of University Hospitals and Health Care Centres, the Greek patient, especially in provincial areas, became entitled to better care. Unfortunately, however, few were concerned with the viability of this system – a system that was extremely patient-friendly, extremely costly, and in general unconventional. Today, in the face of the financial crisis, the non-viable is seen to be stillborn. Stillborn, because from the start the system did not take account of the following:

- cost-effectiveness
- the cost in relation to real GDP
- the quality and merit of the personnel
- the need for systematic renewal of personnel
- the autonomous development of regional health care.

Today, the system is collapsing, unfortunately with no prospect of stabilisation or recovery. The system is huge, since it is staffed by 75,000 physicians who inevitably generate costs. The system is complex, since the island geography of Greece re-

quires special regulations and imposes special needs. The system is extremely aged and significantly lacking in quality, since the postgraduate evaluation of its functionaries has never worked in practice.

Finally, and most importantly, the system has been governed by the same people, capable or not, for the last 30 years. Those same people who are satisfied and certain that the system belongs to them ...