

Greek Healthcare Revisited: The Other Side of the Story

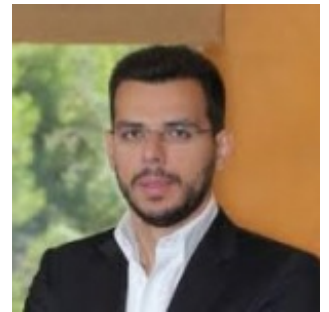
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2017-2-24

By **Vassilis G. Apostolopoulos**

It was with great interest that I read Guardian's long op-ed "[Patients who should live are dying': Greece's public health meltdown](#)". The article, correctly underlined the dramatic impact of prolonged 'draconian' austerity measures and policies which have greatly affected the Greek health system. Austerity in public health systems comes at a very high price. Especially if implemented in the form of horizontal, target-driven cuts, and not the result of thorough, well structured, strategic reforms of the problematic aspects of the health system – streamlining it, upping its efficiency and safeguarding the quality of services offered. Successive Greek governments gravely mismanaged public health policy and the social security system, exacerbating deficits, and, ultimately, shortages and deficiencies. The need for good governance, sound policy, targeted reforms and real time checks in public hospitals through a cutting-edge spending oversight mechanism is imperative. It could save the state €500 million euros annually, providing considerable space for improvements in the system. The Guardian article went on to highlight certain very alarming, yet isolated cases, which accentuate some of the major challenges that the Greek public health system has been grappling with in recent times.



There is another story however, that also merits acknowledgement. One about thousands of patients who would not have lived, if not for the excellent and prompt services offered by Greek doctors in both public and private hospitals and clinics across Greece. The skills, education and resolve of our doctors and health personnel in Greece ensure, on a daily basis, a very high level healthcare for the Greek citizens and all the foreign nationals working and visiting the country; but also to the wave of refugees that our country has come to manage in the last years. People in the UK are well aware of this, not only through their visits to our country, but also through the "Ambassadors" of the Greek health system – the 3.000 or so Greek doctors who have come to work for the NHS in the past 7 years alone. Furthermore, the massive 'exodus' of the country's best doctors to which the original Guardian article referred to, is only in part accurate. Indeed, some talent has left Greece, but the critical mass remains. Some of the very best doctors in the world live, work and provide extraordinary services in Greece, both in private and public clinics. Additionally, many of those leaving, return with added experience and a renewed purpose to see Greece through the crisis and into a new era of prosperity, social and economic progress. In spite of the public health system's shortages and shortcomings, there is still immense talent, promise, experience and expertise offered.

Moreover, while the crisis and austerity also hit the Greek private healthcare sector, and still do through the clawbacks and rebates and over-taxation, the response of the private sector was highly dynamic and successful. In a way, a number of big providers, 'invested our way out of the crisis'. We did not allow the context to drag us down. Instead, through a series of high level investments in top-notch technology, infrastructure, education and training, we successfully upped our regional and global standing, steadily establishing Greece as a promising healthcare hub, ideal for health and wellness tourism. Combined with the country's natural, historical and cultural wealth, arguably, Greece offers a highly competitive package on all accounts.

All in all, while the task is truly herculean, and the battle fought against an adverse broader context, it remains the case that Greece has top level doctors, cutting edge infrastructure, outstanding know-how, and can provide leading quality healthcare at globally competitive standards and cost. Without downplaying the challenges, it would be short-sighted and one-sided to overlook the strengths and opportunities that Greece offers in healthcare today.

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