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Doctors in Portugal, along with many other countries across Europe and beyond, are struggling to save their National Health Services (NHS), including medical doctors' careers and the patients.

In Portugal, compared to the pre-pandemic period, health care delivery to the population decreased furthermore. For instance, in primary health care, citizens without a family doctor (GP) have increased up to 1.6M (i.e. 16% of the population). Several Emergency Rooms of Obstetrics and Gynecology, orthopedics, pediatric, and even general services across Portugal have been subject to intermittently shutdowns in this year, being citizens redirected to other NHS facilities, eventually well away from their residency area. On a yearly basis, doctors in the Portuguese NHS work around 8 million overtime hours, with an average of 300 hours per doctor, twice the amount of the legal criteria.

According to OCDE/OECD, doctors in Portugal are among the worst paid in Europe. Moreover, in the last decade, the purchasing power of doctors decreased 20%. However, in the current year, specific professional classes in the State health service were compensated with a wage increase up to 7%, whereas doctors saw a mere 2% raise. After 16 months of hard negotiations, the Portuguese government failed to provide any appropriate proposals to safeguard the medical career, revealing lack of competence in negotiating an adequate collective bargaining agreement, to respond to NHS doctor's needs, who are at the tail end of the European Union in terms of working conditions, as well.

Presently, doctors are demotivated, discouraged, exhausted, and are moving away from the NHS daily, either to the private sector or emigrate, looking for better paid jobs and working conditions. The ratio NHS:Private sector doctors is, now, 1:1.

Doctor union negotiations with the Ministry of Health started in April 2022, and reached an end on September 12th, without any agreement. The Government not only showed lack of competence to reach an agreement on the signed negotiating protocol topics, but also deceived doctors and public opinion all together. Regardless of the failure, the Government approved unilaterally an average salary increase for doctors of 3.6% only, about €107 a month for most MDs.

A new one-sided work regimen was also approved, which now discriminates wages by professional areas, excluding doctors from the collective bargaining agreement. Moreover, this new regimen can push doctors to a 9-hour workday (instead of the present 8 hours), increases the annual limit of overtime work to 250 hours (instead of the current 150 hours), and considering Saturday as a regular workday. In Primary Healthcare, part of the salary may depend on the quantity of exams required and medication prescribed.

Doctors went on national strike on March 2023, July and on a weekly basis since then, with regional and national demonstrations. Additional strikes are scheduled in October and November.

Adherence has been very high (90%) in hospitals and primary care units. Furthermore, hospital doctors are refusing to do any additional work beyond legal limits and GP any extra-hours. Doctors demand to be treated with respect by the Government, fair wages and dignified working conditions, to allow a sustainable balance between professional and personal life. Doctors want to be part of the solution for the ailing public health service to guarantee high quality health care to all citizens in Portugal in the NHS.

Portuguese MD unions and the medical board continue demanding an effective change in health policies, the implementation of structural measures to support the NHS, and better health care delivery, which includes the improvement of medical careers, working and pay conditions.

Porto, 25th September 2023

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