The destruction of health care in Greece

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Five austerity programmes within the space of two and a half years have reduced the health system in Greece to the level of a developing country and stripped working people of the basic right to adequate medical care.

Although winter has begun and the recent cuts have already had life-threatening and sometimes fatal consequences, the troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank are insisting on further cuts in the sphere of medicine. The result will be the ruination of the Greek health care system for decades to come and the re-emergence of illnesses and diseases regarded as long since eradicated.

In order to save €1.74 billion (US$2.25 billion), patient contributions for vitally necessary drugs are to be increased, while expenditure by public hospitals on medicines is to be reduced and overtime work by doctors restricted. A slate of vicious new cuts will come in January. The contribution for the purchase of drugs will be increased yet again, and plans for hospital reform to reduce costs will result in more staff reductions.

From 2014 onwards, a fee of one euro per prescription is to be levied, together with an increase in the daily sum to be paid for hospitalisation—from the current level of €10 to €25. This will above all discourage pensioners, the homeless and families with children from seeking emergency hospital treatment.

No fewer than 50 hospitals are threatened with closure in the next six months. Two have already ceased operating due to a lack of health insurance payments, which meant that staff had received no wages for between four and six months. The total debt of hospitals with pharmaceutical companies is in excess of €1.3 billion.

Most hospitals lack essential basic materials such as disposable gloves, plaster and catheters. Poorer women have to give birth at home because they cannot afford a hospital birth, which can cost €700-€1,500. Children can only be vaccinated with cash payment.

Due to the austerity measures, drug addicts—whose number has increased 20-fold in the past five years—receive just 15 needles per year, a tenth of the total granted in other euro zone countries. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDE) warns of a new wave of AIDS in Greece, especially in the big cities. In Athens, heroin addicts must wait an average 44 months before they can participate in a methadone programme.

Control of infectious diseases is no longer guaranteed due to the lower standards of hygiene throughout Greece. Chronic respiratory diseases, skin diseases and tuberculosis are all on the increase.

Outbreaks of malaria infections have been reported in five parts of the country, although the disease had been thought be eradicated in 1974. Once again, it is the poorest sections of society that are hardest hit. The lake and orange region of Skala is home to many immigrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan, many living crammed together in small spaces and exposed without any protection to the disease-causing mosquitoes.

The ECDE raised the alarm recently regarding the proliferation of multi-resistant germs. In Italy, the proportion of such germs in bloodstream infections has risen from 15 percent in 2010 to 27 percent in 2011; in Greece, it has risen from 49 percent to 68 percent. The reason: Many people fearful of losing their jobs have resorted to taking strong general antibiotics for minor illnesses, thereby unintentionally reducing their resistance levels.

"We have children who are starving, dehydrated babies", complains Nikitas Kanakis, president of the network Doctors of the World. At the same time, the country is suffering from an unprecedented exodus of doctors. Due to the austerity measures, a consultant will earn just €1,007 monthly beginning in January 2014. This is less than a quarter of what he could expect in a western European country such as Germany.

Instead of demonstrating a modicum of humanity in such a situation, pharmaceutical companies have responded with unrelenting harshness. Due to outstanding debts, the Merck pharmaceutical and chemical company, with headquarters in Darmstadt, Germany, ceased to supply the cancer drug Erbitux to Greek hospitals in early November—a fortnight before the company announced a 16 percent increase in profits to €754 million for its third quarter.

In June, the German pharmaceutical company Biotest had already ceased to supply its blood plasma products. The outstanding debts of the life-sustaining drugs represent less than 2 percent of the annual turnover of Biotest.

While the working population of Greece is helplessly exposed to these inhumane conditions, the wealthy are increasingly turning to medical care abroad. Hospitals in Northern Europe report an increase in operations for patients from the south of the euro zone. "We also find that more and more people from Greece, Spain, Portugal, England and also Switzerland are buying our drugs", declared Lorenz Schmid, president of Zurich's Association of Pharmacists.

Describing the current situation in his homeland, Nikitas Kanakis stated: "The truth is that our health care system has already collapsed…. Stabilisation is not in sight and I think it will get worse. Especially now when a hard winter is approaching and heating costs have become twice as expensive. The gap between rich and poor will increase, which is very dangerous. Social mobility has come to a standstill—children from poor families have little chance of a better life."

A very different assessment comes from Euro Group president Jean-Claude Juncker. Following the passing of another European "bailout" for Greece totalling €13.5 billion, Juncker announced: "Greece is on the right track." In fact, not a cent of the latest "loan to Greece" will go towards the Greek health care system. Instead, more than 80 percent will be consumed repaying interest to the international banks.