

Drug shortages in Europe endangering the lives of children and adolescents

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12 May 2023

The lives of children and adolescents in Europe are being placed in danger due to a shortage of appropriate drugs. On April 27, 2023, paediatricians drew attention to this in an open letter to the health ministers of Germany, France, South Tyrol (Italy), Austria and Switzerland, calling for action to “ensure sufficient production and stockpiling of key paediatric primary care medicines in Europe.”

In an interview with the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, Thomas Fischbach, president of the Professional Association of Paediatricians and Adolescents, warned of a serious shortage of medicines for children in the coming autumn and winter. Fischbach, who is a co-signatory of the open letter, commented on the situation as follows: “We are already treating far from the guidelines, and next autumn is just around the corner. We’re going to be back in a supply shortage that could be even worse than last time.”

The alarming shortage of medicines suitable for children is a Europe-wide phenomenon due to the profit interests of the pharmaceutical corporations as well as the policies of capitalist governments.

Pharmaceutical companies focus on the production of profitable medicines for adults and neglect the development of medicines suitable for children because the market for these is smaller and profit margins are lower. As a result, doctors are forced to prescribe adult medications that are not suitable for children and can have serious side effects.

The Professional Association of Paediatricians and Adolescents (BVKJ) emphasizes that children often require different dosages and forms of medications than adults. The lack of medications appropriate for children often forces physicians to prescribe inadequate or riskier drugs, posing a significant health risk.

The letter states, “Children and adolescents require

comparatively few medications, but they are not readily interchangeable. In particular, antibiotics, antipyretics, analgesics, medications for asthma, and vaccines represent indispensable and essential basic needs.”

According to the letter, “the impact of government austerity measures and price regulation ... is hitting the medication sector for children and adolescents particularly hard ... Yet medication costs for children and adolescents are marginal compared to adults.”

However, the current shortage of medicines does not only affect preparations for children. Across Germany, pharmacies are short of cough syrups, asthma medicines, blood pressure-lowering drugs, painkillers and cancer drugs, among others. In addition, the German Hospital Association warned of an increasing shortage of medicines in hospitals.

The situation in health care is not only strained when it comes to medicines. Cuts are also being made everywhere else.

The situation in hospitals has become increasingly unbearable over the past three years due to the burden of the coronavirus pandemic. With a shortage of 200,000 nurses, those remaining in the hospitals have shouldered the situation provoked by politicians, sometimes at the risk of their lives. Now they are being forced to accept a further loss in real wages in the current contract bargaining round despite catastrophic working conditions and already low wages.

As a result, many qualified and experienced professionals are leaving their jobs, further exacerbating the overall situation in the health care sector, while hospital operating companies are profiting from the increasingly precarious situation.

The causes of the drug shortage and the catastrophic situation in the health care system are closely linked. The government has used the pandemic to enforce a

new principle: Preventable deaths must be accepted to increase profits. This is now evident everywhere, including in the care of children.

The current crisis in health care is symptomatic of the inhumanity of the capitalist system, which subordinates people's needs to profit. While health and education are being cut to the bone by governments, tens of billions are being poured into military rearmament against the will of the people. This misanthropic policy is particularly drastic in the handling of the pandemic. While it has been officially declared over, more than 12,000 people worldwide are still dying every day as a result of the pandemic and the virus continues to mutate.

Adequate supplies of children's medicines, the fight for decent wages in health care, and an effective strategy against COVID-19 require a fight against capitalism. All the establishment parties have shown that they place profits above people's lives. What is needed is a society that focuses on the needs of the people, especially the needs of children. This is the only way to establish health care that is truly accessible to all and prioritises life.



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