

PUBLIC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM AND FOREIGNERS: RESEARCH IN THE MAZOVIA PROVINCE – SUMMARY

The statistics of recent years show a constant increase in the number of migrants residing in Poland, particularly since 2014. As the number of foreigners grows, they increasingly become patients of the healthcare system. When using the services, they face a number of systemic, communication, cultural barriers, and barriers connected with the specific health needs of migrants. The medical care system overcoming these barriers is essential for providing effective care with respect for the rights of patients - foreigners. There are several reasons for the need to ensure adequate access to services for migrants - the obligations of the National Health Fund, international agreements, the obligation to provide assistance in situations of threat to life or health as well as the economic interest of the care system and public health. The last reason has become particularly important in the context of the experience of SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. The spread of an infectious disease such as COVID-19 shows how important it is to ensure access to effective healthcare for everyone - regardless of their origin or nationality.

The study aimed to describe the preparation of the public health care system in the Mazowsze Province to provide services for migrants. In the thesis, the public health care system is interpreted as the service provided on the basis of an agreement with the National Health Fund. Two separate studies were carried out - one exploring the situation of foreign patients, and the other focusing on the perspective of health care workers. It enabled a comparison of two perspectives - service providers and care recipients.

Material and methodology

Study of foreigners

The study of foreigners was conducted in quantitative methodology. An original questionnaire was developed as a research tool, consisting of 27 questions (open, closed, and semi-open). The questionnaire was published on the Internet (the link to the questionnaire was published on the website of the Students' Self-Government of ED MUW). Among students of years 1-3, the paper questionnaire was conducted during selected classes. In total, 138 completed

questionnaires were collected, which constituted 24% of all students studying in the academic year 2017/2018 of The English Division of the Second Faculty of Medicine of the Medical University of Warsaw. The majority of students (66%) were women. 87% of respondents were between 19 and 26 years old at the time of the survey. The survey results were statistically analyzed using the Statistica software.

Study of employees of health care facilities

16 facilities were included in the study - 8 primary health clinics and 8 hospitals in the Mazowsze Province. The facilities were selected to represent different types of health care facilities. In each facility, three employees were selected representing three steps that each patient goes through: registration, caregiver, and administrative procedure required for covering the costs of medical care. In total, 50 employees took part in the study.

The research was carried out with the qualitative method using the interview technique based on vignettes. During the study, employees were presented with six cases of migrant patients, followed by an in-depth interview. During the interview expected way of taking care of patients was explored based on the respondent's experiences or imagination. Vignette scenarios were based on a specially prepared matrix that included various factors that may affect the process of providing health care.

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Results

The results of research on foreigners

The survey conducted among students of ED MUW indicates the difficulties they experience in accessing healthcare. The main barriers faced by students are the lack of knowledge about the health care system in Poland and language problems that hinder communication with medical staff.

Only 17% of the respondents described their knowledge of the healthcare system in Poland as sufficient to know what kind of medical assistance can be received and where. According to the research results, the knowledge of Polish by foreigners plays a key role in getting to know the healthcare system.

Most of the students participating in the study declared that in case of illness they prefer taking treatment in their country of origin. 66% of respondents stated that they sometimes postpone the visit to the doctor in order to be able to get medical help in their home country. At the same time, as many as 67% of students participating in the study used medical care system in Poland.

ED MUW students use health care services on the basis of various types of insurance. The largest group (30% of respondents) declared that they are insured in another European Union country and in Poland they use the EHIC. 29% purchased health insurance by themselves. As many as 17% of respondents are not covered by insurance or do not know if they are insured.

Most of the students spoke English in contacts with healthcare professionals. 50% of students rated their communication with the staff as satisfactory, while 31% said they were not satisfied with it.

On the basis of the results, it can be assumed that other students - and more broadly - other foreigners, face even greater barriers in accessing medical care than medical university students.

Results of research on employees of health care facilities

Most of the registration employees at the institutions included in the study stated that foreigners use their services every day or several times a week. Employees of hospitals in Warsaw had contact with migrants most often - in all hospitals it was stated that such patients are treated daily. Most often they are citizens of Ukraine, EU countries, and migrants from Vietnam and China. In one clinic, which is located in the area with a high number of migrants from East

Asia, a pediatric clinic treated so many Vietnamese children that a special day was designated for vaccinations for this group of patients.

The basis for insurance for foreigners differs from those applicable to Polish citizens. However, there is a lack of complete and detailed sources of information about insurance and required documents. The problem is covering the cost of treatment provided in a life-threatening condition to uninsured persons. Currently, these costs are borne fully by the facilities that took care of the patient. Access to free medical care for children and pregnant women without Polish citizenship remains an unresolved issue.

The barrier most often shown as the main difficulty in taking care of foreigners was communication. The steps taken to respond to the emerging difficulties indicate that this problem was noticed, e.g. one of the accreditation standards for hospitals is the existence of the procedure for communication in different languages. However, the procedures currently implemented in facilities in the Mazowsze Province do not guarantee an effective overcoming of the language barrier. In this situation, it is often the patient's responsibility to organize the translation. Most translations in medical facilities are conducted by the so-called translators ad hoc, i.e. by people who are not professionally prepared.

The research shows that medical care workers have little awareness of the differences regarding the health needs of foreigners and Polish patients. The problems that were indicated as more frequent among foreigners concerned mainly on injuries (in particular, work-related injuries) and mental disorders related to adaptation difficulties.

Likewise, most healthcare professionals are unaware of the impact of cultural differences on health and medical care. Cultural barriers become noticeable only when patients openly disagree with a specific behavior that is against their culture - for example, undressing for examination.

Conclusions

- Employees of health care facilities in the Mazowsze Province are providing services for foreigners. Migrants are especially often patients of emergency departments in Warsaw hospitals and primary health clinics located close to the centers of the foreign community. In all surveyed hospitals in Warsaw and in half of the clinics, registration employees stated that they have contact with foreigners every day (i.e. at every duty).

- Even foreigners privileged in access to medical care (i.e. ED MUW students) experience difficulties in receiving medical care in case of illness and in communication with medical staff. 65% of the surveyed students assessed their knowledge of the Polish health care system as insufficient to know what kind of help and where they can go in case of health problems. 31% of respondents who used medical care in Poland assessed the way of communicating with medical staff as unsatisfactory.
- The main barriers in the care of foreigners noticed by the employees of health care institutions in the Mazowsze Province are the communication barrier and covering the costs of services provided to uninsured migrants.
- There are no systemic solutions enabled to overcome the language barrier when providing services to patients with low polish proficiency. The procedures implemented in some institutions in the Mazowsze Province do not guarantee effective and quick translation assistance. In this situation, the burden of providing translation rests primarily with patients - foreigners.
- In the case of uninsured migrant patients, attempts to cover the costs of services are often ineffective and the costs of provided services are borne by the medical facilities. Access to free medical care for children and pregnant women without polish citizenship remains an unresolved issue.
- It is necessary to start working on the development and implementation of solutions for overcoming the language barrier (e.g. in the form of pilot studies), as well as to take actions which, on the one hand, will reduce the number of uninsured foreigners (e.g. facilitating access to voluntary insurance in the National Health Fund) and, on the other hand, will shift the burden of costs of treatment of uninsured patients in a life and health-threatening condition from medical entities to central units.
- There is a lack of updated and accessible sources of knowledge on the rules of insurance of foreigners. While in large hospitals, where migrants are frequent patients, the staff working in registration know the conditions of insurance, knowledge in facilities that foreigners use less frequent may be lower.
- The issues related to adapting the care to the patient's cultural background are hardly noticed by the staff of the institutions included in the study. The exception of this is situations when

patients openly disagree with a specific behavior that is against their culture - for example, undressing for the examination of health care provider opposite gender.

- There is low awareness among the examined personnel regarding the specific medical needs of foreigners. In institutions with a greater number of foreigners, there are problems regarding the vaccination of migrants children (the need to adapt the vaccination program to those carried out in the country of origin, translation of vaccination records).
- When analyzing solutions for the care of foreigners that could be introduced in Poland in the future, it is worth looking at the British experience, bearing in mind, however, the need to adapt activities to the Polish medical care system and the migration situation in Poland. Enabling all persons staying in the country free medical consultations and basic health care as well as introducing telephone interpreting seem particularly valuable.
- The vignette test technique can be an effective method of examining the behavior of medical personnel during health care. Analysis on this topic should take into account the perspective of different professional groups caring for patients. It is also worth comparing the perspective of patients and medical staff - which enables a more complete understanding of the interactions during the provision of services. At the same time, the study of different groups as well as the use of various research methods and techniques enables the use of a triangulation strategy.