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PORTUGAL SITUATION ON SEPTEMBER 2022
FEMS REPORT

In 2022, the crisis in the Portuguese National Health Service (NHS) worsened, and in the present period, deteriorated further.

Presently, Portugal ranks 9th regarding the total cases of COVID-19 infections in Europe, with a total of 5.440M cases and 24,909 related deaths. About 86,7% citizens (8.9M) were fully vaccinated, and 4th dose vaccination is in progress. Therefore, most restrictions were lifted. Masks are only mandatory in nursing homes, hospitals, health centers and related units. Nevertheless, home confinement is still mandatory for people with a positive test result, but not enforced.

Despite the stabilization of the COVID-19 situation, Portugal has been recording an excess mortality in the last months, with a rate of 23.9%. This indicator is almost four times higher than the European Union average (6.2%) and affects both children and adults, which should be seen as warning signs.

Comparing to the pre-pandemic period, health care delivery to population failed furthermore. Emergency Rooms, especially in Gynecology and Obstetrics, have been daily routinely closing in the last two months at a random pace, and users are sent to other NHS units away from the residency area. Hospitals are also diverting doctors from scheduled activities, consultations, and surgeries, to ensure emergency room. Yearly, doctors in the NHS work around 6 million overtime hours, with an average of 300 hours per doctor. Hundreds of specialists and residents delivered disclaimers and declarations stating unavailability to provide overtime work beyond the yearly legal limit of 150 hours. In primary health care, citizens without a family doctor (GP) have increased to 1.4M (14% of population). Doctors are demotivated, discouraged, and move daily away from the NHS to the private sector or emigrate, looking for better paid and working conditions.

Portugal has an absolute majority of the Socialist party in parliament since March 2022. After daily media breaking news concerning maternal and/or newborn deaths and difficult access of pregnant women to health units for delivery, the Minister of Health (MH), who had been previously re-conducted, has resigned in the end of august, claiming lack of conditions to stay in charge. A Socialist member of the European parliament has been nominated MH a few days ago.

A Collective Bargaining process was initiated, after years of government lack of willingness to convene, that covers a new work regime ("full dedication"), valorization of work in the emergency room, specific rules of organization and work discipline and, at a great cost, a salary table review.

Doctors' representatives hope that this recent MH change is not used as a distraction from the difficult moment that we are going through, and will not postpone further discussion, now that the most waited negotiation period finally started. Portuguese medical unions and the medical board demand effective change in health policies, implementation of structural measures to support the NHS, and better health care delivery, which include improvement of medical careers, working and pay conditions. The health of citizens living in Portugal cannot wait furthermore.

11th September 2022