

FOREIGNERS' OPINIONS ON THE FUNCTIONING OF POLISH HEALTH CARE – A SURVEY STUDY

Opinie obcokrajowców na temat funkcjonowania polskiej ochrony zdrowia – badanie ankietowe

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SUMMARY

Background. As a result of globalisation and Poland's joining the European Union, more and more foreigners are coming to Poland to work, as tourists and for other purposes, sometimes settling in Poland. They also use the Polish health care system during their stays in Poland. Poles usually complain about their health care system, but there is a lack of foreigners' opinions. Our detailed on-line survey in English for foreigners living in Poland will help to better describe their satisfaction with the Polish health care system, as well as their opinions and comments, which will help to improve the system in the future.

Objectives. The aim of the study was to have the Polish health system evaluated by foreigners that used it during their stays in Poland.

Material and methods. 486 respondents answered questions in an English language questionnaire, which was published in March–August 2017 in Facebook discussion groups of foreigners living in Poland.

Results. Respondents gave positive opinions on private health care – as really fast, good, well-equipped, with friendly doctors speaking English. Negative opinions concerned: lack of a good command of English among medical staff, long waiting time to make an appointment with a doctor, poor conditions of buildings and equipment; they complained mainly about public health care. Foreigners used health care services for many reasons – from a fever to fracture etc.

Conclusions. There were many opinions, both negative and positive. Negative ones should be taken into consideration in improving the Polish health care system.

Key words: Polish health care system, foreigners, satisfaction, opinions.

STRESZCZENIE

Wstęp. W wyniku globalizacji i przystąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej coraz więcej obcokrajowców przyjeżdża do pracy do Polski, w celach turystycznych lub innych, czasami osiedlając się tutaj na stałe. Oni korzystają również z usług polskiego systemu ochrony zdrowia podczas swojego pobytu w Polsce. Polacy często narzekają na system ochrony zdrowia, ale brakuje opinii obcokrajowców. Nasza szczegółowa ankieta w języku angielskim skierowana do obcokrajowców żyjących w Polsce pozwoli ocenić ich satysfakcję z polskiego systemu ochrony zdrowia, jak również poznać ich opinie i komentarze oraz pozwoli ulepszyć system w przyszłości.

Cel pracy. Ocena polskiego systemu ochrony zdrowia przez obcokrajowców korzystających z jego usług podczas pobytu w Polsce.

Materiał i metody. 486 osób udzieliło odpowiedzi na ankietę w języku angielskim, która była publikowana od marca do sierpnia 2017 w facebookowych grupach dyskusyjnych obcokrajowców żyjących w Polsce.

Wyniki. Ankietowani udzielili pozytywnych opinii na temat prywatnej ochrony zdrowia – jako naprawdę szybkiej, dobrej, dobrze wyposażonej, z miłymi lekarzami władającymi językiem angielskim. Negatywne opinie dotyczyły głównie publicznej ochrony zdrowia – braku dobrej znajomości języka angielskiego wśród personelu medycznego, długich kolejek oczekujących na wizytę, złego stanu technicznego budynków i sprzętu. Obcokrajowcy korzystali z usług placówek medycznych z różnych powodów.

Wnioski. Było wiele opinii, zarówno negatywnych, jak i pozytywnych. Negatywne powinny być wzięte pod uwagę celem poprawy polskiego systemu ochrony zdrowia.

Słowa kluczowe: polski system ochrony zdrowia, obcokrajowcy, satysfakcja, komentarze.

BACKGROUND

Due to Poland's accession to the European Union, the rapid development of our country, the rise in living standards, relatively low prices and numerous foreign trips of Poles, foreigners arrive and permanently or temporarily stay in Poland. In recent years, the number of foreigners granted a temporary or permanent residence permit in Poland has increased significantly [1]. Numbers of foreigners who study at Polish universities and foreign tourists are also growing [2, 3]. During foreigners' stays in Poland, they may have to use local health care facilities. Poles have guaranteed access to health care, which derives directly from the Constitution of the Republic of Poland [4]. They should carry a PESEL identification number with them, which will be used to register visits to Polish health care facilities, except for emergencies where immediate medical attention is provided without checking the patient's personal data. On the other hand, foreigners, depending on their country of origin, when in need of health care services (except for emergencies where it is not possible to obtain the patient's personal data), in addition to their identity card, should also have an EHIC card (for nationals of the other Member States of the European Union), use a bilateral agreement concluded by Poland (and present a valid visa), which applies to citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Russian Federa-

tion and Serbia, or hold an appropriate medical insurance policy (citizens of other countries) [5–8]. While using health care services in Poland, foreigners may face various difficulties: ignorance of the Polish health care system, communication difficulties and other unpleasant experiences. This study will present experiences and opinions of foreigners who have already used the Polish health system. There are very few studies about foreigners' opinions about health care in Poland, they are mainly negative, but the source is very scarce [9–12]. Thus the authors decided to investigate further this topic

OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to have the Polish health system evaluated by foreigners who used it during their stays in Poland.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

486 respondents answered questions of an English-language questionnaire [13], which was published in March–August 2017 in Facebook discussion groups of foreigners living in Poland. The questionnaire was prepared by the author of the study. The respondents had to be adults and had to use at least once Polish health care services. The data collected in the survey did not permit to identify the people who took part in it. Microsoft Excel and Statistica 10.0 were used to evaluate the results.

RESULTS

Data of 486 adult foreigners who had used Polish health care services were analysed. They represented 47 countries from all the continents. 64% of the respondents were men, mostly living in Poland between 1 and 3 years, and aged between 30 and 40 years, using health services usually between 2 and 5 times, of both public and private health care (Table 1). Factors the foreigners taking part in the survey considered positive were: the access and cost of drugs, waiting time to get private health care services, professional knowledge of health care staff as well as the working hours (Table 2). Negative ones were: waiting time to use public health care, cost of private health services, command of foreign languages (Table 3). The opinions were also divided due to the countries of origin of the participants – among those whose inhabitants were the most numerous in that survey. The less satisfied with the waiting time to use public health care were Ukrainian and Turkish respondents. More than 70% of Turkish respondents pointed that the cost of private health care services for them was at least high. For more than a half of respondents from India, Turkey, Spain and United Kingdom the knowledge of foreign languages in Polish health care services was at least dissatisfactory (Table 4).

More or less the same number of foreigners recommended Polish health care to other foreigners as did not.

The foreigners were also asked to describe their most positive impressions of Polish health care. Most of them indicated private health care – as really fast, good, well-equipped, with friendly doctors speaking English [13].

Table 1. Data of foreigners who responded to the survey

Data	Results
Country of origin	outside European Union (56.5%), European Union (43.5%)
Sex	male (64%), female (36%)
Age	30–40 years old (31%), 25–30 (28%), 18–25 (26%)
Time of stay in Poland	1–3 years (35%), 3–10 years (30%), < 1 year (18%)
Frequency of using Polish health care services	between 2 and 5 times (36.5%), more than 10 times (31%)

Table 2. The most positive impressions of the Polish health care indicated by foreigners who took part in the survey

Feature	Results
Working hours of Polish health care system	satisfied (33%), very satisfied (12%)
Professional knowledge of Polish health care staff	satisfied (38.5%), very satisfied (14.5%)
Waiting time to use private health care facilities	satisfied (38%), very satisfied (21.5%)
Access to drugs in Polish pharmacies	satisfied (41.5%), very satisfied (17.5%)
Cost of the drugs	normal (47%), low (7.5%), very low (4%)

Table 3. The most negative impressions of Polish health care indicated by foreigners taking part in the survey

Feature	Results
Cost of the private health care services	high (33%), too high (16.5%)
Knowledge of foreign language	dissatisfied (27.5%), very dissatisfied (19.5%)
Waiting time to use public health care facilities	dissatisfied (19%), very dissatisfied (37%)

Table 4. The most negative impressions of Polish health care indicated by foreigners taking part in the survey by nations that were most numerous in the study

Country	Opinions on the waiting time to use public health care services	Opinions on the cost of private health care services	Opinions on the knowledge of foreign languages (especially English) of the medical staff
India	very dissatisfied (30%), dissatisfied (13.5%)	too high (32.5%), high (32.5%)	very dissatisfied (27%), dissatisfied (24.5%)
Ukraine	very dissatisfied (50%), dissatisfied (27%)	too high (3.5%), high (52%)	very dissatisfied (4%), dissatisfied (15.5%), neutral (58%)
Turkey	very dissatisfied (51.5%), dissatisfied (9.5%)	too high (29%), high (42%)	very dissatisfied (31.5%), dissatisfied (31.5%)
Spain	very dissatisfied (48.5%), dissatisfied (17%)	too high (22.5%), high (22.5%), normal (50%)	very dissatisfied (24%), dissatisfied (31%)
United Kingdom	very dissatisfied (21.5%), dissatisfied (25%)	too high (11.5%), high (54%)	very dissatisfied (21.5%), dissatisfied (35.5%)

However, they also expressed their views on negative impressions of Polish health care. The most frequent opinions were: lack of good command of English among medical staff, long waiting time to make an appointment with a doctor, poor conditions of buildings and equipment; they mainly complained about public health care [13].

The main reasons for foreigners to use Polish health care services were as follows: high fever, pregnancy and delivery, accidents. Other reasons for visits were: stroke, surgery, dental problems *etc.* Some of the foreigners indicated many reasons because they had had to use health services many times [13].

DISCUSSION

Following a detailed analysis of respondents' answers (representing several foreign countries with different cultural backgrounds), one can notice a slightly negative or mostly neutral overall opinion of Polish health care, which was not generally recommended by foreigners. They mainly focused on the lack of command of foreign languages (mainly English) by health care workers, shortage of equipment and poor infrastructure of Polish health institutions. Is it really that bad? In our opinion, it is not. Why? First of all, Poles themselves complain about their health care system. As the CBOS poll shows, in 2015 as many as 74% of Poles complained about the Polish health care system, which was a higher proportion than that of the foreigners taking part in the survey [14]. Besides, not only Poles complain about their own health care system. Citizens of Eastern and Central Europe tend to complain much more about their health care system than those of Western countries [15]. Satisfaction with health care can be achieved as well in different countries outside Europe; for example, according to surveys made in Nigeria and Singapore [16, 17]. Secondly, the opinion that Poles do not know foreign languages, and English in particular, does not seem to be true. The number of Poles who speak English is constantly increasing; now at least every third Pole can speak that language. There are also quite many people who know German and Russian (although here the number of Poles who can communicate in the latter language has dropped recently). In comparison with some of the European countries, Poles have a good command of English [18, 19]. However, there are also countries in Europe, especially Scandinavian ones, where the knowledge of English is far better than in Poland [20]. Thirdly, it must be acknowledged that many hospitals require renovation and greater financial help [21]. Also, a relatively small number of foreigners in Poland can cause difficulties in under-

standing and misunderstanding of their cultures, languages and habits. But there are changes as well, thanks to training sessions for health professionals covering transcultural issues in medicine [22, 23].

CONCLUSIONS

1. Foreigners from many different countries use the Polish health care system and their opinions may vary due to their countries of origin.

2. Private health care in Poland was usually evaluated well by the foreigners and the public one received worse opinions.
3. The poor command of English among medical staff was highlighted, although there are studies that deny the existence of such a phenomenon on a large scale in Poland.
4. A number of measures are required to improve the quality of Polish health care so that more foreigners will evaluate that in a positive way.

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