

## **PRIVATE SECTOR MEDICINE-INCREASING EXCELLENCE AND VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO STATE SECTOR**

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### **Introduction**

Humanity and altruism are deeply imbedded in every human being. Therefore all the professions that deal with helping other people have always been particularly valued and appreciated. The decision to become a doctor ever since ancient times has always been considered extremely noble, for it requires a lot of sacrifice and dedication. All the civilizations considered the people who chose to become doctors as noble individuals and they were positioned on the top of the social list. So this profession not only united the best human qualities and personal satisfaction in providing help for the others, but also assured a high social status. Even though in the past, for the reasons mentioned above and also for the simple fact that the education required was much more accessible to men, male doctors outnumbered the female colleagues by far. Nowadays with the changes in the society and the emancipation of women, more and more women decide to take the challenge and chose this profession. Another reason for this fact is the male need to reach the high leading positions and high places in the today's society as quickly as possible so they tend to choose different professions (for example managerial positions) to achieve their goals. Being naturally more patient and hardworking, women are more willing and ready to progress in a slower and more systematic way without expecting immediate results. Because of the increasing number of women who chose the medical profession, it's becoming more and more a "female" profession which certainly adds quality to it. Moreover, the responsibility of women in the society also because of the additional role they have, that is, being mothers at the same time, makes it harder, but also for this reason the choice of the medical profession is more based on the humanity and sensitivity than the status that it brings.

### **Private and state hospitals: competition or complementarity?**

Before 1990's, the most attractive specializations could have been obtained only in the state hospitals, very often for political reasons and with the help of political mentors. Working in private institutions was

the only choice for the non politically and socially accepted individuals. Unfortunately because of this criteria, not always the most qualified and perspective doctors had the opportunity to progress and become leaders in the field. Therefore, the non-politically acceptable individuals were forced to put an additional effort in trying to make progress which was very hard without logistical and financial support by the state. As a result of the facts mentioned above, the top medicine was only available in clinical hospitals in big cities which were well equipped and had the opportunity to follow the trends and educate their doctors.

So many of the heads of departments became top experts and practiced therapies that kept up the pace with the latest trends in the world. But despite their expertise, they were forced to work for the equal salaries and were not additionally motivated or financed.

In order to award such top specialists, in 1994 the Croatian health minister prof. Andrija Hebrang, introduced the possibility for these individuals to work in the afternoons in private offices to motivate them additionally. Also, in this way, the patients were given the opportunity to contact the top experts directly without the need to wait or look for other options.

Even though it was a good idea in theory, it soon became clear that it was not immune to corruption. Many of the doctors and experts started redirecting the patients from state institutions to the private ones, so the only opportunity to be visited by one of them was an appointment in one of the private clinics. Also, the patients who had been visited in a private clinic had the priority when it came to being operated or to having tests preformed at the state hospitals.

Instead of improving the state medicine, the opportunity to work privately became a major problem in terms of corruption.

For this reason the opportunity to work both in private and state hospitals has been cancelled and the doctors have been given the chance to choose where they want to work. A great majority decided to stay in state hospitals for fear of losing their positions and not being able to survive in private clinics. But after getting used to money that circulated in private clinics, the bad habit of taking the money from patients who wanted to speed up the visits remained.

Only rare and respectable individuals chose to switch to private clinics without fear of selection and survival on the market. They explained this moral decision by saying that paying for private high quality services should be at least legal and transparent. Leaving the 'safety' of state hospitals was a courageous decision, especially because the patients were not used to going to private clinics and they thought that paying for health insurance for years, should give them the right to have the services for free.

But since the economic crisis started to grow, the transitional market develop, and the lazy state system started to fall behind in terms of expertise and logistics, with waiting lists that were becoming longer and longer, the patients started looking for additional value and above average services in private institutions.

At that point many doctors realized that by staying in state hospitals, they are losing the 'battle' of knowledge and quality of services so they either decided to join the already existing private clinics or start their own business.

The result was additional weakening of the state health system which was already behind, not only expert and material-wise but also because it started losing the most valuable and top employees.

A number of other problems and reasons in state hospitals motivate and encourage doctors to choose the private sector. Of course, not only the dissatisfaction of the health workers, especially doctors should be the main reason for choosing the private institutions.

The doctors now realize that moving to the private sector gives them the opportunity to improve their knowledge, work with top equipment and technology, have better logistic organization, the medicines and disposable materials are more available, there is a smaller hierarchical pyramid and there is a possibility for top education in the country and abroad. There is also a cooperation with medical universities which gives them the opportunity to have an academic career as well.

The doctors who used to be able to learn certain medical methods and use them in state hospitals only, now can do it in private clinics with newer equipment and with all the material necessary.

Instead of seeing the private institutions as an added value, state hospitals and their heads started developing animosity towards them envious of the better equipment and financial gains. Also, many patients who wanted to give their money to doctors in state hospitals in order to obtain better services, preferred to spend the same money in a legal way so the state professors lost an extra profit. That's why not only did the development of the private sector significantly improved the quality of services, but it also helped decrease the corruption in the state hospitals by overtaking the exclusiveness of

certain procedures performed in the state hospitals only, up to that moment.

After the first phase of confusion and envy, the doctors in the state hospitals started seeing that instead of continuing the war with the private clinics, it was better to accept the challenge and not continue losing the scientific and professional credibility. Even the patients themselves, after having experienced and received good results in private clinics, either personally or referred to them by friends and family, started requiring the same standard of services in the state health system.

As a good example in ophthalmology is retinal detachment surgery which is usually delayed in state hospitals even though it is an emergency operation, while in private clinics the patient undergoes surgery within 24h.

If the patient undergoes surgery immediately, his sight is better, furthermore, the patients are also educated and they require the same treatment in the state hospitals. The state hospitals therefore cannot continue with the same old-fashioned procedures because the patients are more informed about the options and possibilities they have. For this reason, the private institutions help correct and improve the quality of health services which used to be the role of the state hospitals.

### **Academic medicine in private institutions and creative partnership**

The private sector that used to be at the margins, with non adequate spaces, small number of employees and modest equipment is now becoming the leading sector of Croatian medicine. One of the best examples is a specialized ophthalmological clinic Svjetlost in Zagreb which 4 years ago moved to a new six-floor building with over 2000 square meters that according to its architectonical adequacy and equipment not only reaches the state standards but surpasses them overwhelmingly and can be compared to the most modern clinics in the world. It is logical that this type of private health system requires constant dedication and passion towards the profession compared to the doubtful behavior of the private doctors many years ago which were not interested neither in development of the private nor state activity.

Instead, this dedication and focus on the development of private institutions and raising the standards, will result in top accomplishments.

With time, the state is starting to consider the private medicine not as a competitor but a partner. By treating a certain number of patients in private clinics, the waiting lists in the state hospitals are becoming shorter and the use of disposable material and the pressure on the state health system is diminishing. Also by setting up the

health services in private institutions, the state raises the standard of its services, it's able to lower the prices of many services and stimulates competition in the health sector.

The state would achieve a lot by trying to direct the health reforms towards the public-private partnership. Such directing is an important part of any serious health reform especially in some parts of Croatia where some services are not available unlike in big city clinical hospitals.

So for example, in well-off Istrian region, a patient suffering from a heart attack has lower chances of survival because the hospital in Pula doesn't have the ability to implant a stent while a patient from a poor area of Zagorje can be transferred to any hospital in Zagreb. Considering the growing prices of certain medical procedures and medicines, the amount of money that people pay for medical insurance in our country is too small compared to other western countries in order to reach the same levels and standards.

For this reason the private clinics cooperating with the state could overcome that gap because the state would pay for performed services only while the private clinic could insure the space, salaries for employees and the education.

So the future of the development of private medicine lays in reaching the same western quality standards, with the possibility of developing the health tourism and this way, positively influence the state health reform.

One of the good examples comes from the oil business. The Ina gas stations became more modern, better equipped and they also started providing additional services like restaurants, toilets, shops and car washing services but only after the arrival of the private competition. The quality can't be imposed by administrative obligations but only as a result of a healthy competition.

Private institutions also provide additional possibilities. In the past, the academic career could have been achieved only in state health institutions linked to the University. There was a well known hierarchical line to get scientific titles and it was impossible to arrive to a certain title taking a shortcut. On the other hand, there was no possibility to get any scientific titles in private institutions.

The best education was only available in the state hospitals. After reaching a certain level of education, the desire to improve, grow professionally and even leave a written trace of their skills is human and understandable so the private clinics also started developing that segment.

On the other hand, the new Universities like the one in Rijeka, Split, Osijek or Mostar want to be associated to the top experts in order to give their students the

possibility of high quality education. It is in the interest of all to link them with the private clinics where the students can get good education or the experts from the private clinics can give lectures at the Universities. The Svjetlost clinic became the first private institution which received the status of a clinic, given to it by the University of Rijeka and the professors from the clinic teach at the Universities of Rijeka and Zagreb. So the monopoly of the state hospitals in the education of students and the possibility to obtain academic titles doesn't exist anymore.

On the contrary, the private clinics are becoming interesting places for the education of young doctors because of the better equipment and providing most modern services which give the opportunity of top education similar to western countries.

The private clinics are becoming the best places for the 'state of the art' education. They enable the education in the country and abroad for its employees giving them the opportunity to attend different courses and congresses paying for the all the expenses. All this is being done in order to raise the standards, incite the competition with the state hospitals which don't invest in education much even though it is well known that the medical profession is very dynamic and constantly improving and changing.

So despite of the fact that before it was considered impossible working in a private clinic and at the same time developing an academic career, the situation today is radically changing. At the moment, there are 20 young doctors who can do the majority of their residency program at the Svjetlost as approval was granted by the Croatian Ministry of Health.

All the equipment for diagnostics and surgery is equal to the one in western countries and there is even a wet lab where the young doctors can perform their first operations on the animal eye model.

In this way the private institution invests in the education of its employees, and human resources are the biggest value when it comes to achieving excellence.

Besides the teaching activities, the private institutions are turning more and more often to scientific activities by receiving scientific projects financed by the Ministry of Science or other sources. The projects are performed individually or in cooperation with well known institutions like Rudjer Boskovic. The leaders of these projects are doctors from the private clinics which have scientific titles or collaborate with other leaders from the state institutions. Also young novices participate in these projects and they can also obtain scientific titles.

During these projects, the new discoveries are presented at meetings in Croatia or abroad and they can be published in scientific magazines.

The private institutions are becoming the core of various scientific projects and publishing, so the young people interested in science can achieve faster progress here than in state institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Even though they are still outnumbered by the state institutions, the private ones are a reliable partner to the state sector and the state should encourage both sectors in order to raise the overall quality of the health system

and to reach the standards of other western countries. This will be possible to obtain only by raising the criteria of excellence and turning our attention to four inevitable factors: focus, passion, dedication and vision.

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