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Death Waiting Lists

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Written by Whistle Team

The presentation of Bojana Bokorov MD at the round table “Ten Years of (Un) Successful Fight Against Corruption” held at the Serbian Journalist Association on October 6, 2010.

I am an oncologist, a radiologist, and a docent at the Oncology Department of the Medical Faculty in Novi Sad. I am also the deputy director of the Radiol Therapy Clinic. Of around 6,000 patients in Vojvodina who have been waiting for radiology therapy, as many as 3,500 of them would never have a chance for treatment because of the limited capacity of the Clinic and trading with the waiting lists.

Despite the tragic situation, in March of last year we started offering the radio therapy to the patients coming from abroad, predominantly from other countries of Former Yugoslavia. The waiting lists with names of our patients simply disappeared, or, to be more precise, their place was taken by the patients from abroad. The point was that these patients paid for the treatment, and my colleagues tried

to make a big profit.

The aforementioned situation went on until January 1, 2010, when the Minister of Health put a ban on such a practice and announced that the collected money would be used for purchase of the new radio therapy equipment, which has not happened yet. Foreign citizens have continued to come for treatment through connections with individual doctors or politicians, or as emergency cases. Financial gain has been the main driving force.

After I had already noticed numerous irregularities in the work of the Clinic, starting from the absence of the patients' protocol, the Clinic advertized through the media that new patients would receive therapy using the new sophisticated equipment that secures minimal damage to the healthy tissue. This was also a lie. As we were overbooked, they were treated with the old equipment for the price of Euros 3,000 to Euros 5,000 that was supposed to provide them therapy by the conformal precise 3d radio therapy machine.

The waiting lists were becoming longer every day. We internally called them – Death Waiting Lists, as, in oncology, waiting simply cannot be afforded. It is critical to start either chemotherapy or radio therapy within three weeks after a carcinoma has been diagnosed. I have the names of our patients who were way behind on the waiting lists, and were able to receive the treatment immediately after they had paid around Euros 1,500. Others had to wait for more than six months. When we would call them at the time their turn would come to schedule the therapy, we would find out that they had passed away in the meantime.

At the same time, a young colleague of mine, Vanja Karadjinovic, pointed out to the irregularities and insisted that such a practice had to be stopped immediately. She was instantly exposed to public persecution by Prof Marko Erak, the Director of the Radio Therapy Clinic, who had become the master of our time at the Clinic and off work. She tried her best to endure, but eventually gave up and moved to another country. She moved to Montenegro. Although she is a registered specialist, the Institute withdrew her license from the Medical Doctors' Society, and expected her to come back on her knees and beg. They even refused to give her back the employment records, because of which she could not have the health insurance card issued to her child. Because of this, she filed a lawsuit against the Institute.

The trial started in May 2009. In September 2009, I went to the court and offered to be the witness in this case. Another colleague of ours, who left the Clinic because of the persecution and moved to Banja Luka, also agreed to testify. It is shameful what this respectable and older colleague was exposed to - extreme mistreatment and torture! On September 17, we all came to the hearing, as the witnesses were supposed to testify. When the five of us entered the courtroom, we were greeted by another judge, who informed us that the judge in our case had been on sick leave and she scheduled us a new hearing for November 24, 2010. We left the courtroom and consulted in the corridor what to do next. Our lawyer excused himself and went for a second to other courtroom to make inquiry on another case.

Shortly afterwards, he joined us again and said that he had personally seen the judge in our case, who was reportedly ill, in the courtroom. We all went there with him and saw our judge chatting cheerfully with members of the jury as she had extra time before the next hearing. She was very aggressive to our lawyer and accused him of having made big problems to her already with the appeals he had sent to the Appellate and Cassation Courts. She then burst into tears and said that she did not want to die at the age of 41. We all left the courtroom in shock.

Following the incident, our lawyer sent a formal complaint to the Court's President and his deputy. As they were not in the Court on the day of the incident, we could not go straight to their offices and complain at the spot. The media refused to report on the story, there was a ban on it. Ever since I

addressed the Committee for Health and Family on July 22, when I talked for the first time about the events in Sremska Kamenica to the members of the Parliament and the public, I have been exposed to a lynch. Nevertheless, I am determined to go on.

After I had brought the issue to the attention of the Minister of Health (I sent him over 12 letters that I have never received a reply to), I addressed the Ombudsman, Sasa Jankovic for help and he protected me. He sent a letter to the Minister of Health and my supervisor, director Prof. Dusan Jovanovic. Following the public statement I had made, I was accused of slandering the Institute by some people at work. I was outraged! The equipment for the radio therapy was bought with Vojvodina money (foreign citizens had nothing to do with it) and they must not be given a preferential treatment while the citizens of Serbia have to wait. Our citizens could not wait that long, they would pass away before their turn would come. I sent the list with names of people who were on the waiting list but died before their number was up.

Regardless of the protection I received from Sasa Jankovic, the director the Ombudsman has been protecting me from has sent me three warning letters threatening me with Disciplinary Commission. I have been told that after five summonses to disciplinary proceedings, I will be fired. I have appeared before the Commission three times thus far, and the last thing my director did was to reduce my salary. I am on a sick leave at the moment, as I fell at work and suffered leg injury. And nothing has changed at work. Foreign citizens receive treatment either as emergency cases or as the patients remaining from the 2009 waiting list, with whom an international agreement was signed in Republika Srpska. Of course, the original patients from the 2009 waiting list have either found an alternative institution where they have already received their therapy or have passed away. Given my 24 year experience as an oncologist I am absolutely positive about it.

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