



MSF statement about access to healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented people in Greece

The international medical humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) expresses serious concerns about the Greek government's denial of access to healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented people in Greece. Since the revocation of access to a social security number known as AMKA on 11th July 2019, the Greek authorities have failed to ensure asylum seekers have free, adequate, timely access to the public healthcare. This has had a grave impact on the physical and mental health of the children, women and men we treat in our clinics on Lesbos, Samos, in Athens. Furthermore, prior to the revocation of AMKA, asylum seekers and refugees had multiple other barriers in accessing healthcare due to significant systematic and structural gaps in the provision of essential and urgent health care.

It's been more than 5 months since the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs revoked access to the social security number, known as AMKA, for third-country nationals. In October an inter-ministerial circular reintroduced AMKA, thus access to healthcare for several groups, including EU citizens and refugees, however – to date, asylum seekers and undocumented people remain excluded. As a consequence, almost 50,000 people¹ have been left without access to health care, among them new arrivals through the land and sea borders, unregistered people and even babies born in Greece. This is all despite article 33 of Law 4368/2016, which guarantees free healthcare for everyone – regardless of their legal status.

The government's unwillingness to find a swift solution to the administrative-legal vacuum is depriving people of necessary treatment, medical tests and preventative care and is, of course, harming people's current and future health status and well-being. On behalf of our patients, we have raised these concerns with the Ministry of Health, EODY and the Ministry of Citizen's Protection. However, despite numerous promises that an alternative system will be put in place, after five months nothing has been implemented.

Our medical and mental health teams witness daily the harmful health consequences of the intentional exclusion of asylum seekers and undocumented people accessing their fundamental right to health. Between July and November this year, in our day centre in Athens we have seen a steep rise in the number of patients

¹ 48,664 ppl both land /sea from July to Nov UNHCR data

seeking care who don't have AMKA, going from 18% of patients in January to 43% in November. Many health conditions our patients present with are manageable with regular treatment, yet, as people are unable to access this, their conditions are at risk of deteriorating.

Those affected are, men, women and children with HIV/AIDS; men, women and children with diabetes; men, women and children with epilepsy; men, women and children with heart disease; men, women and children who have cancer and many others with chronic and complex conditions, who are all being systematically excluded from crucial, urgent and regular treatment– which, of course, leads to a deterioration of their health, with untold serious damage and possibly even death. As medical professionals, we are seriously alarmed by this situation.

For instance, we treated a young pregnant woman living with HIV who was at serious risk of transmitting HIV to her baby unless she was receiving antiretroviral treatment. However, she was unable to access this life-saving treatment for both her and her unborn child because she did not have AMKA. After a great deal of searching, our team found a hospital that agreed, as an exception, to provide her with treatment – because of the high risk of her conditions.

Since March this year, our paediatric primary healthcare clinic in Lesvos has seen more than 250 children with chronic and complex conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes, heart disease and asthma and other chronic and complex conditions. They all urgently need regular medication, tests and follow-up care, yet the already overwhelmed public hospital and primary healthcare clinics are unable to provide the appropriate care because they simply do not have the specialist medics required to treat their conditions. Our primary healthcare clinic is not equipped to provide appropriate long –term and specialist care. We are struggling to cope with this increasing demand and forced to turn away other sick children who need medical care back to the horrendous conditions in Moria camp, who may well return when they are in a worse condition

Because most of these children don't have AMKA, they cannot get free medication through the public system, so we are forced to, once again, substitute the role of the state and provide medication for most of these children.

If left without appropriate care, especially for certain conditions the unhygienic, unsafe and abysmal conditions in Moria RIC, will aggravate the disease and many of these children's conditions will lead to long term and irreparable damage. For instance, without regular access to hospital care and medication, we will start to see children with epilepsy having more convulsions, which if left untreated for a prolonged period of time can lead to brain damage. We are extremely concerned that some children might die due to lack of access to the care they need.

Furthermore, the lack of AMKA has prevented asylum seekers and undocumented people from getting free medicines. Most asylum seekers receive 90 euros in UN-funded cash assistance per month – thus have two options: not getting the medication they require or to pay the full price of medication when they do not have

the means to do so. For example, our patients with Hepatitis B without AMKA have to pay up to 1,200 euros for the minimum treatment needed . This is completely unaffordable for most people, let alone asylum seekers and undocumented people.

The absence of AMKA has added an additional administrative barrier for a population who already struggle with the structural gaps in the provision of essential and urgent care; communicate with administrative staff and clinicians as the severe lack of cultural mediation and who are themselves overwhelmed and understaffed due to austerity measures, which significantly reduced hospital budgets and medical supplies. This has often had the result that manageable medical and mental health condition risked becoming more severe and potentially chronic.

We want to stress that we see on a daily basis already overburdened, overwhelmed doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners in hospitals and clinics working hard to provide care for people, despite them not having AMKA. As medical doctors and a medical humanitarian organisation we share and support such commitment. Yet, even despite the goodwill of many medical and paramedical colleagues, this is not enough as the systemic administrative barrier to accessing healthcare remains. This withholding of healthcare from thousands of asylum seekers was a political decision and thus requires the political will to solve it.

The new legislation on International Protection provides an alternative route for asylum seekers to access the national health system, through a health number, known as PAAYPA. However, despite coming into effect on 1st November 2019, this has not yet come into action. We are also concerned that this health number is directly linked to the asylum procedure, meaning if someone's asylum claim is rejected this will automatically result in immediately losing access to health services.

As medical professionals, we are seeing the irreparable damage to health caused by the government's harmful exclusion from much needed access to healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented people in dire need. We see the agony and anguish of parents knowing their children or other family members can't get the right treatment. This denial of access to care cannot continue nor must it be tolerated.

Today in Samos, Lesbos and Athens we continue to receive multiple patients a week with chronic and complex conditions – and in many cases these people need further treatment. This is the case for more than 140 children who cannot get the specialist care they need in Lesbos. We call for these children to be immediately transferred from Lesbos so they can get the specialist care they need.

Whether under the abbreviation of AMKA or PAAYPA we urgently call on the Greek authorities to immediately ensure access to the free, timely and adequate healthcare for all asylum seekers and undocumented people in Greece.