

## Economic Crisis Hits Lebanese Health Care

As Lebanon's economic crisis deepens, many health workers are unpaid, medical equipment runs short, and hospitals might even face closure. Sharmila Devi reports.

Analysts say Lebanon is facing its worst economic crisis since the end of civil war in 1990. The country's banks have imposed limits on US dollar withdrawals, and shortages of the US currency have pushed up prices while the Lebanese pound has slumped. Many Lebanese people fear even tighter currency controls or a devaluation of the pound, which has been pegged to the US dollar for 22 years. As a result, hospitals are struggling to pay for supplies, equipment, and health workers' salaries.

Since last October, mass protests against corruption and the worsening economy have taken place, with demonstrators calling for a technocratic, transitional government to replace the current one dominated by Iran-backed Hezbollah and its allies.

"We are in a deep economic crisis and the main reason is corruption, which reached unparalleled levels in the past few years", Karam Karam, a clinical professor of medicine at the American University of Beirut, who served as health minister in the 1990s, told *The Lancet*. "All of the economy is affected, with many shops and companies shutting down, and even some hospitals might also have to close." His view was echoed by Aya Majzoub, a researcher in the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. "The situation in hospitals is quite dire; they're restricting operations, and some [hospitals] may close down", she told *The Lancet*.

"In terms of supplies, for example, there is a shortage of certain sizes of stents, so they are using different ones that could cause complications. Hospitals can't import prosthetic limbs because they're expensive and custom-made. Meanwhile, some blood banks are sanitising water bottles to transport blood."

Private hospitals provide 82% of Lebanon's health-care capacity and, along with public hospitals, are supposed to be reimbursed by the government through the National Social Security Fund and military health funds.

But private hospitals are owed \$1.3 billion, and received no government funds at all in 2019, said Majzoub. This situation is seriously compromising the ability of hospitals to pay staff and to purchase medical supplies.

In addition, Lebanese medical suppliers are struggling to obtain dollars for imports, after the government decided last November to guarantee only 50% of the dollars needed.

The guarantee does not cover new medical equipment or spare parts, such as those for ventilators or MRI machines. The central bank guarantees 85% of the dollars needed by importers for medicine, wheat, and fuel.

The government has made a request to the International Monetary Fund for technical assistance and is also drawing up new guidelines on capital controls, following much criticism. To pay for imports, medical suppliers have resorted to obtaining dollars at a poorer rate from private exchange brokers compared with the official rate, said Majzoub. But they cannot raise the local price of their imports, because these prices are set by the Health Ministry in Lebanese pounds.

As a result, they are losing money. "So far, doctors are still getting paid, but many nurses are working with no or half pay, and this is pretty common around the country", she said. "Thankfully, we haven't heard of any deaths, but hospitals are very worried for the future."

Doctors such as Karam are providing services for free where they can. "There are doctors in private medicine who aren't seeing as many patients because they can't afford it", he said. "I help out in the free outpatient clinic at the American University of Beirut's medical school. I see lawyers, dentists, engineers, and other educated people coming in because they can no longer afford medical care." Lebanon's *Daily Star* newspaper reported that some doctors had waived surgery fees and contravened hospital regulations by seeing patients outside of hospital hours for free.

The full impact of the economic crisis on public health would take time to become apparent, but it was a worrying sign that people were cutting back on their use of primary health care, Nisreen Salti, associate professor at the American University of Beirut, told *The Lancet*.

"We know that people are foregoing non-essential health care and have cut down their use of preventive and primary health care, which could be very costly for people and the system in the medium and long term", she said.

Rapid inflation since the protests began last October, along with rising unemployment, was making health care unaffordable for many, she said.

"The long-term effects will be very difficult to reverse and very deleterious to health."

Sharmila Devi

