

Belarus Running Out of Medical Supplies

Over the last months problems with the supply of medicine have reached an alarming state in Belarus. While Belarus is able on its own to produce basic medical supplies, to a large extent it relies on imports. In addition, raw materials for domestic production also need to be imported. These imports became very difficult to acquire because of currency exchange rate [manipulations](#) by Belarusian authorities. The number of items available in pharmacies has dramatically decreased and the problem reached a critical level in recent days.

Despite all the declarations given by the country's president that healthcare is a strategic priority, the results of this policy show just the opposite. Over the last six months many importers have been unable to buy medical products abroad due to the lack of foreign currency. The situation changed when the authorities issued a list of medical products for which it was possible to buy foreign currency at the favorable official exchange rate of the National Bank.

The move helped to keep prices of medicine stable but expensive for retired people who have to live on their melting pensions. The system worked until about 10 days ago when suddenly the flow of foreign currency for medical purposes stopped. The impact on the market was disastrous.

Many importers recently stopped selling medical supplies to pharmacies because they had no interest in being paid in worthless Belarusian roubles which they could not convert into hard currency. They had even less interest in having Belarusian roubles in their accounts because they anticipate another wave of devaluation in the near future.

The market for pharmaceuticals is drying out, leaving less and

less items in Belarusian pharmacies. On the dental supplies market, importers usually act as retailers at the same time. The currency exchange problems had the same effect here. Over the last ten days it has been nearly impossible to buy any dental materials in Belarus since all companies have stopped their operations. Some dental clinics already refuse to accept patients due to the lack of supplies.

On 26 August the government established a commission consisting of 14 people from different state institutions, dominated by nine people from the Ministry of Health. The commission's task is to make decisions on the allocation of foreign currency – what companies should get hard currency, and for what purpose. There is no legal regulation of this commission, yet and there will be further delays until it is functional. In the meantime, clinics and patients are left without the necessary medical supplies.

The only organization which may have reliable information about the market is RUP "Belmedtechnika" – a state owned trade and distribution company in charge of medical supplies. But most managers of this organization were dismissed not long ago because of corruption. Some senior managers have been arrested. The new management knows little about the market and how it works and it will take a while before they can catch up. It can be anticipated that "good personal contacts" to members of this body will help firms to get approval for import from them. Bribing and corruption is likely to flourish again as was as in the past with "Belmedtechnika".

Health care in Belarus is in a desperate situation now, but was bad even before the crisis. According to the World Health Organization, male life expectancy in Belarus is 64 years. Compare this with 71 years in the neighboring Poland or 78 years in France. It is very common in Belarus to give small bribes to medical personnel in exchange for better treatment, a hospital bed or a badly needed surgery. It is difficult to blame doctors for this because their salaries are very

low. Many doctors and medical professionals have already left the country and now work mainly in Russia. There the salary for the same job can be almost ten times higher.

As a result of failed economic policies, [support](#) of cheap alcohol and cigarettes, and poor management of the health care system, Belarusians live shorter and less healthy lives. It is impossible to buy cement and some other basic goods in Belarus right now. But this is still a minor problem compared to the situation when a person with a chronic illness cannot buy a lifesaving medicine.

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