

Slovak healthcare needs thousands of medical workers

Slovak doctors, nurses and midwives are not hesitating in finding better work conditions abroad.

Martin Novák has been working in Germany for five years now in the field of orthopaedics, traumatology. The Slovak studied in the Czech Republic and then decided to find a job in Germany.

“The main reason why I left abroad was finances, of course,” Novák told The Slovak Spectator, mentioning that Germany still lacks doctors, so it is easier to find a job there even as a fresh graduate and speaking broken German.

Novák’s beginning was not easy. He lived in a car for practically half a year, he was beginner at his job and he did not understand much, since he cannot rely on Latin because German use their own medical vocabulary. However, he coped with everything and remained in Germany, like many Slovak doctors who decide to find a better-paid job and working conditions.

Many Slovak medical students decide similarly to Novák to study abroad, the destination often being the Czech Republic with medical faculties in Prague, Brno and Olomouc. Some students remain there, some return home and others continue further to the West.

Today, hundreds or even thousands Slovak doctors work abroad, as data from the national medical chambers demonstrated. More than 1,230 Slovak doctors work in Germany, and there are 522 Slovak doctors with primary medical qualifications from Slovakia on the UK medical register, of whom 367 hold a licence to practise in the UK and more than 2,250 Slovak doctors work in the Czech Republic.

Slovakia currently lacks 3,338 doctors and 1,020 nurses. If medical staff over the age of 65 is taken into consideration, there is a shortage of 5,515 doctors and 1,700 nurses, as the newest analysis Condition of Medical Staff in Slovakia demonstrated.

About one-fifth of medical students cancel studies or leave abroad after finishing studies. When it comes to nurses, fewer than half, only 44 percent, employ themselves in healthcare in Slovakia.

More students, fewer leavers?

PM Peter Pellegrini requested medicine faculties in Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice, Martin) to accept 185 more students to study in this academic year. Medical faculties will receive €2 million to cover the expenses linked to more students.

Many talked about a short-term solution, but the Health Ministry rejected it.

“Graduates will replace the doctors at a higher retirement age in a few years,” said Zuzana Eliášová, spokesperson of the Health Ministry, as quoted by the SITA newswire. She stressed that the solution is effective from the long-term point of view.

Marian Kollár from Slovak Medical Chamber considers this measurement to be insufficient to drag young doctors to practice in Slovakia.

“It is necessary to finalize the system of doctors’ education, especially to prepare young graduates to be self-reliant, and a quality entrance to specialized practice,” Kollár told The Slovak Spectator.

Medical students also express their disagreement with the following steps. Politicians do not think about clinical practice when it comes to increasing successful medical student applicants, thinks Bálint Lovász, head of the Student Council for Higher Education.

“The capacity of the hospitals to teach practical subjects is insufficient,” explains Lovász, as quoted by SITA.

Vice President for Internal Affairs of Slovak Medical Students’ Association, Katarína Bugárová, opined that the increased number of medical students will not prevent their leaving abroad if the salaries and working conditions for young doctors will not improve.

“There is a shortage of the people who should teach us,” said Bugárová, as quoted by SITA, referring also to the insufficient capacity of lecture rooms and changing rooms.

Stabilization scholarship

The Health Ministry is attempting to address the shortage of nurses in Slovak hospitals, too. Andrea Kalavská, the Health Minister, proposed so-called stabilization scholarship of €2,000 per year to nursery students. If a nurse remains in Slovakia after studies for at least two years of every paid year, he or she may keep the money, otherwise, the state will request its return.

For example, if a nurse will study for three years to obtain a BA title, he or she has to stay in Slovakia for at least six years working in the field, otherwise, it will be necessary to return the money.

The Slovak Chamber of Nurses and Midwives (SK SaPA) sees the measure as an attempt to keep nurses in the process of education but not in Slovak healthcare after finishing their studies.

“We assume that only students who do not think about leaving abroad will use this pseudo-stimulus,” Milan Laurinc, office director of SK SaPA, told The Slovak Spectator, adding that the loan is an option, not an obligation.

Laurinc pointed out a different attitude when addressing the shortage of doctors, nurses and midwives.

“It is naïve to think that a graduate will be satisfied with a scholarship and will not think about what awaits him/her after graduating,” opined Laurinc, meaning that poor working conditions and inadequate salaries are the most frequent reasons for leaving abroad.

SK SaPA proposed investing €2.5 million that should be invested in loans for nursery students for a recruitment grant when starting to work.

What next?

Dušan Zachar, healthcare analyst from the Institute of Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO), sees the measure as a necessary step to at least have a chance of young graduates remaining in Slovakia.

“However, more important are the measures that will come after. Those should reform the entire healthcare system so as to be more attractive for its workers,” Zachar told The Slovak Spectator.

Easing access for medical staff from other countries (also non-EU) interested in working in Slovakia is another crucial step. This is how it works in the West, Zachar explains. The recent discussion was on how to make entrance exams for Ukrainian doctors easier so as to be able to find a job in Slovakia.

For many the most important improvement of work conditions and salaries is an unavoidable step, according to the medical chamber, chamber of nurses and midwives and analyst. Martin Novák also concurred with the opinion.

“If someone offered me the same salary as I have in Germany now, I would return to Slovakia with no hesitations,” he stated.

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