

International Conference

Healthcare as a Public Space: Social Integration and Social Diversity in the Context of Access to Healthcare in Europe

05 and 06 September 2019, Rijeka, Croatia

Health care, understood as a medical space, is an excellent example of a public space that models the processes of social integration and social equity. However, depending on its organisation, it can also influence the societal segregation of minority groups. The project *Healthcare as a Public Space* (official website: <http://www.healthcare-access.eu/en/>) led by Professor Florian Steger (Ulm University, Germany) focuses on diversity in the general social context of health care, viewed as a public space, as well as in the specific context of medical institutions. The aim of this project, conducted through the collaboration of four national project groups, is to generate systematic and in-depth knowledge about how and to what degree the European norms and guidelines concerning diversity are implemented in national legal regulations in Germany, Poland, Slovenia, and Croatia, and how they are realised in clinical practice in these countries.

The conference has been organised with the financial support of the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) programme with the financial participation of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung – BMBF), Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki – NCN), Croatian Ministry of Science and Education through the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti – HAZU) as HERA handling agency, and Slovenian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport (Ministrstvo za izobraževanje, znanost in šport – MIZŠ).

As one of the first project activities, the Croatian research group organised the International Conference *Healthcare as a Public Space: Social Integration and Social Diversity in the Context of Access to Healthcare in Europe*. The conference took place on 05 and 06 September 2019 in the city of Rijeka (Croatia) at the Croatian research group's home institution, the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Medicine.

The conference started with the greetings of Professor Tomislav Rukavina, the dean of hosting institution, followed by Professor Florian Steger, the project leader, and Professor Amir Muzur, the principal investigator of the Croatian team. During the first conference session, international experts in the field delivered their invited lectures. In her lecture, **Fiona Godfrey** (Belgium) focused on public health challenges and opportunities in the new Commission and European Parliament during the ongoing term of 2020 to 2024. Starting with the presentation of the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Godfrey discussed the main challenges to the national healthcare systems in the European Union countries. Because of disappointing results of the EU health policy in the last five years, there is a strong need to increase the budget for the EU public health in the following years as well as formulate achievable common goals for all EU member states in this area. These goals should include reducing health inequalities, promoting healthy lifestyles, and strengthening national health systems. The lecture *Access to Health Care as Seen by the Slovenian Human Rights Ombudsman* delivered by **Simona Mlinar** (Slovenia), presented the work of the human rights ombudsman dealing with individuals' problems in exercising their rights to equal access to health care system in Slovenia. Based on four presented cases, Mlinar outlined the Slovenian human rights ombudsman's practice, which affects both individuals and medical professionals. These cases show that, despite the legal system and the appropriate legal bases, in practice, there are difficulties in treatment and access to health care for aliens, Roma people, asylum seekers, and other minority groups. All these individual groups need special treatment in exercising their right to have access to health care in Slovenia. **Marek Szilvasi** (Germany) gave the lecture *Ethnicity and/or Social Marginality as a Structural Determinant of Health in Europe*. He emphasised that the health outcomes of Roma populations are among the main public health challenges in contemporary Europe. Research studies revealed that Roma are disproportionately burdened by chronic but preventable diseases, and the life expectancy and health status are significantly lower than for the non-Roma population in all European countries. They are facing many barriers and inequities in gaining access to quality health care, including lack of health insurance, lack of access to preventive programs (e.g. vaccinations for children), and sexual health and reproductive health services. In his presentation, Szilvasi discussed patterns and challenges of the health status of the Roma population in Croatia and Slovenia in comparison with other countries. The topic of the following lecture was legal remedies

for the victims of discrimination based on ethnic origin in Slovene and international law. The lecturer **Jasna Murgel** (Slovenia) analysed the international, European, and domestic legal framework regarding remedies in case of ethnic origin-based discrimination when it occurs within the health care system. Slovene legal system, which incorporates European Union law, regulates equal treatment in health care and provides different mechanisms for combating discrimination on any ground. Murgel pointed out since case-law relating to discrimination in the field of health care almost does not exist, it is not yet possible to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the actual legal remedies. She concluded her presentation by saying that it is very likely that in everyday life in Slovenia there are still certain ethnic groups and minorities who have been deprived of access to health care, such as Roma people or some temporary workers from the former Yugoslav Republics. The last presentation of the first part of the conference, entitled *Being in between a Man and a Woman. Biological Sex Versus Legal Sex in Polish Public Space*, was given by **Agnieszka Bielska–Brodziak** (Poland). The lecturer dealt with the discrimination of transgender and intersex persons in access to health care services in Poland. Bielska–Brodziak argued that limitations in access to health services may be either connected with medical sex correction or separated from that process (e.g. reproductive health services of transgender men). These limitations are not only shortfalls of the legal system, but also of other relevant factors, such a lack of social awareness and lack of willingness to accept differences as a consequence of religious and cultural background.

The next session brought into discussion new topics related to diversity in health care in Europe. **William Wang** and **Jacek Kornak** (United Kingdom) gave their presentation *Crisis and Wellbeing in the Emergency Department*. The emergency department one can see as the juncture between the public and in-patient care. Authors used the case study of the emergency department in Charing Cross Hospital in London to explore the ethical and cultural value of modern society in a UK context. This hospital environment served to examine the spatial relationship between mental health patients in urgent and emergency care settings. **Mirko Prosen** (Slovenia) presented the qualitative research project results on health care professionals' experiences and perceived barriers when delivering care to immigrant women in institutionalised care in a maternity hospital in the south-western part of Slovenia. The language barrier was recognised as one of the main obstacles in delivering care. In this context, participants also mentioned that there are no available systemic solutions to tackle this issue. The most challenging cultural communication is with Albanian immigrant women. **Vanessa Zeeb** (Germany) in her lecture entitled *Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Care for Persons Seeking International Protection - Prospects and Limits of Prevention* focused on prevention of mental illnesses in the context of the German Asylum Seekers Benefits Act (AsylbLG). According to the

law, the right of asylum seekers to medical treatment is limited to acute illnesses and conditions of pain and the prevention of mental illness is not taken into account. Zeeb emphasised that the lack of early intervention for potentially traumatised persons with refugee experience may lead to severe mental illness, thus restricting the health-related quality of life also for their families, and consequentially it can affect the entire society. The last speaker at the conference, **Artur Cichocki** (Poland), in his presentation *AI in Healthcare - Between Modernity and Ethics in Public Space*, discussed the potential benefits of artificial intelligence but also ethical issues that may arise due to its uncontrolled development and usage in health care. According to Cichocki, artificial intelligence may contribute to the provision of lower-quality services, meantime, the human doctor's assistance might become more expensive. This may divide the community into those who will be a constraint to use cheaper treatments, i.e. medical artificial intelligence, and those who will benefit from more expensive health service offered by human doctors.

The conference ended with fruitful final discussion and exchange of ideas that will definitely bring new perspectives, and it will have an impact on shaping the future steps of *Healthcare as a Public Space* project and its research activities.

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