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Perspective

Physicians' brain drain in Greece: A perspective on the reasons why and how to address it

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ABSTRACT

This review study explores the "brain drain" currently evident amongst physicians in Greece, which is closely linked to the country's severe financial woes. In particular, it shows that the Greek healthcare labour market offers few opportunities and thus physicians are forsaking their homeland to seek jobs abroad. The main causes generating or greatly inflating the brain drain of Greek physicians are unemployment, job insecurity, income reduction, over-taxation, together with limited budgets for research institutes. It is argued that, to stop the evolving mass exodus of skilled medical staff, policy-makers should implement fiscal and human-centred approaches, thoroughly safeguarding both the right of skilled Greek physicians to work in their homeland with motivation and dignity, but also of Greek citizens to continue receiving high-quality healthcare by skilled physicians at times when this is mostly needed.

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1. Introduction

The main factors contributing to the exacerbation of the so-called "brain drain" in Greece are closely linked to the causes of the financial crisis and its striking effects on Greek society. To manage the crisis, which reached Greece in early 2008, the Greek state was forced to receive consecutive bailouts from international authorities in exchange of severe austerity measures, aiming mainly at the drastic curbing of public spending [1].

Despite bailouts and austerity measures, the Greek economy is still struggling as a result of its six straight years of recession, whereas current evidence shows that the long-term implications of the financial turmoil on several sectors of Greek society have already become more than apparent. Moreover, according to official data issued by the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) in May 2013, an evolving increase in unemployment rates appears as one of the main and most critical consequences, thoroughly reflecting the disappointment of the vast majority of Greek citizens, particularly younger ones, for a hopeful, rather than a bleak, future [2–4]. Recent data indicate that, as a dramatic result of the increased unemployment in the first five months of 2011, more than 35,000 Greeks registered their curriculum vitae in the EU-sponsored Europass scheme, which aims to increase mobility within the EU. More than 22,000 of them were under 30 years old [5].

Greece experienced a similar major wave of migration in the late 1950s and 1960s, when unemployment was also strikingly increased. However, the main difference

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between the last migration and the current propensity of Greeks to move abroad is that these migrating or considering leaving now are usually young, talented, ambitious and highly educated rather than poor and undereducated in pursuit of better life conditions [5].

The figures of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advocate in favour of the latter view, as they show that the quality of human capital currently available in Greece is much higher than it used to be a decade earlier. Nonetheless, 13% of University-educated Greeks were unemployed in 2011 compared with the 5% OECD average, whereas the unemployment rate in 2011 among University-educated young adults (25–34 years old) increased by more than 26%, compared to 2008 [6].

In line with the latter data, the unemployment and the severe austerity measures imposed on education and the labour market were the main factors generating brain drain, thoroughly threatening Greece with a mass exodus of qualified people. In addition, the current economic conditions, associated with limited public funding for research and reduced salaries, have discouraged scientists working abroad to come back to their country [2,5].

In this context, the exodus of Greek scientists abroad is particularly evident amongst health professionals, mostly physicians [5,7]. As several European countries, such as Germany and Sweden, are in need of specialised physicians, while the Greek healthcare labour market offers few opportunities, physicians are forsaking their homeland to seek a job in more robust economies.

In this paper therefore, we are going to describe the characteristics and consequences of medical brain drain in Greece. Our main objective was to explore the dimensions of this contemporary Greek problem and to consider ways to address this effect of the financial crisis, and to contribute to stopping the mass departure of Greek physicians. To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first attempt to address this serious problem, which seems to have a significant impact on Greek society and severe implications in the current financial situation.

2. The brain drain discourse: the physicians' case

The term "brain drain" refers to the large-scale immigration of educated and qualified individuals, mainly doctors, scientists, engineers and financial professionals, from their countries to seek better social and/or working conditions abroad [8]. Initially, the majority of scientists used to move from developing to developed countries. However, globalisation, coupled with the worldwide financial crisis, has changed the scene and brain drain has expanded to developed countries. In the modern era of knowledge-based economies, the true dimension of brain drain cannot be easily and accurately estimated, especially given the free trans-border movement of human capital, particularly in the EU. This is why the term "brain drain" should be distinguished from "brain circulation", which describes the increasing movement of scientists around the globe and concerns the international flow of human capital [9].

In any case, a mass national exit towards a foreign country is usually the result of economic disturbance, limited opportunities, low income and restricted living conditions. Alternatively, it can be caused by political and social instability as well as lack of political freedom. Brain drain makes countries lose a dynamic part of their human capital, such as young and talented scientists, when they are mostly needed to contribute to the society's development and growth [10].

In addition, brain drain reflects a loss of national resources, because, while being educated in their countries, scientists on the move will eventually work to the benefit of the recipient society which, importantly, has not borne the cost of their training [11]. For example, recent data show that a loss of training investment is becoming considerably evident in Africa, due to physicians' immigration particularly from sub-Saharan African countries [12]. In fact, resource-poor countries have incurred $2.17 billion in losses of returns from investment for physicians currently working abroad, whereas the main destination countries, UK and the USA, gained a benefit of $2.7 billion and $846 million respectively, according to recent observations [12,13].

Furthermore, available data point out that the USA, UK, Canada and Australia traditionally represent the recipient countries of physician graduates living abroad. For example, according to a report issued by Mullan, 40–75% out of 23–28% of international medical graduates who immigrate to the aforementioned countries come from lower-income countries (e.g.: India, Thailand, Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, etc.). Additionally, the Scandinavian countries (mainly Norway and Sweden) were recently added to the above list of the largest recipients [14,15].

The global code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel, issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), was issued in May 2010 as a multilateral framework for tackling the shortage in the global health workforce and the migration of health care workers from developing to developed countries. As such, to fulfil its objective and address the challenge, the global code established principles towards the promotion of ethical recruitment practices via bilateral agreements between developed and developing countries, to meet their own health workforce needs [16].

However, despite the wide acknowledgement of its significance, the implementation of the code to rebalance the effects of brain drain has not been successful. It is telling that, from the 69 countries that have designated national representatives to assess the code's provision, only Norway finally implemented the fundamental principles of this framework [17].

3. Perspectives on physicians' brain drain in Greece

The impact of the crisis and its devastating consequences in real life caused a huge wave of physicians to migrate abroad indefinitely [18]. Recent data show that, since 2010, there is a constantly evolving mass exodus of Greek graduates and specialised physicians. According to an announcement of the Athens Medical Association (AMA), issued in 2012, there has been a five-fold increase in the number of specialised Greek doctors migrating abroad compared to 2007, i.e.: 1166 vs 292. According to the same

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