

Health Politics – a new government

A new Government

A new coalition government was sworn in on 16 November 2007 with Prime Minister Donald Tusk leader of the major partner *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO Civic Platform – centre right) and Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak leader of the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (PSL Polish Rural Party – farmers).

Ewa Kopacz (PO) a paediatrician was appointed as the Minister of Health

The PO Election Manifesto

The PO election manifesto stated that the party would introduce health care sector reform which would lead to:

- improved quality and access to health services
- cheaper essential drugs
- increase in health employee salaries

The manifesto further stated that it is necessary to catch-up the health status lag compared with the EU. Poland spends a much lower percentage of GDP on health than most developed nations. The healthcare system is de facto subsidised by doctors and nurses because they have very low salaries. There are difficulties in employing doctors of certain specialities due to the brain drain and medical students aim to work abroad once they have qualified. The PO had already submitted draft legislation on patient's rights and patient's ombudsman to Parliament.

The proposals also provided for a removal of the health insurance system from the sphere of current politics. The current *Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia* (NFZ National Health Fund) will be divided up into a few public funds offering basic health insurance and citizens will have the right to choose their Fund. In future other entities will be able to offer services on equal terms. A basket of guaranteed services will be developed and publicised. Insurance funds will also be able to offer additional insurance that would cover above standard procedures and those not covered by basic insurance. Provisions will be put into place that will ensure access for the poor and excluded. The government will pay for highly specialised services, emergency services and catastrophes as well as health promotion and disease prevention.

There must be clearly determined rules in order to end the current chaos of the health care system. Health care facilities must have defined capabilities and responsibilities. Facilities owned by local authorities will undergo restructuring and become shareholder companies and their assets will be evaluated so that they can become eligible for loans. They will be expected to pay these off, by themselves. In order to improve functioning, providers must be subject to competition. Patients will decide on the map/network of facilities through their choice of provider.

In terms of pharmaceutical benefits the plan is to improve access and reimbursement of newer and more effective medicines based on evidence and to change and simplify the reimbursement principles to make them fully transparent.

The PSL Election manifesto

The PSL stated their health priorities as more efficient management for greater health gain but also increased funding. They also proposed a guaranteed basket of services and equality of providers with competition to improve services, as well as universal and easy access to primary health care. The program included increased salaries for doctors and nurses to prevent the brain drain. The priorities included disease prevention as well as the promotion of health, healthy lifestyles and nutrition. Attention was to be paid to school children's general and dental health. PSL intended to lower the cost of medicines, particularly those imported from abroad.

Coalition Agreement

It is clear that the election manifesto's of the two coalition parties contain many similarities and that this should not be a source of tension within the government. The recognition of health as an important political issue is apparent since this is the first point of the coalition agreement. The parties to the agreement recognise that the health care system is in a critical state and is in urgent need of repair, resulting in increased access to medical services, improvement of their quality and increased salaries.

Prime Minister's Exposé

In his inaugural speech the Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that the first line task for the government is the repair of the health system which is in catastrophic state. The government has no plans for a revolution but intends to continue some of the good proposals initiated earlier but suspended by the previous government. Comprehensive legislation is necessary, encompassing the entire health system. The Prime Minister identified realistic access, particularly for disadvantaged groups and waiting lists as priority problems which must be addressed. The government intends to complete the health care restructuring process halted by the previous government and a network of hospitals should be created through patient choice rather than by central government decision. The Prime Minister stated that decentralisation of healthcare is not synonymous with privatisation and that decisions should be taken at the level of their impact.

The speech echoed the election manifesto referring to competition as a means of improving the quality and range of services and the need to increase salaries. Competition will be introduced between payers and the NFZ will be divided into a few institutions so that they compete for funds. This will require precise definition of what is in the basic guaranteed basket. New provisions will allow additional insurance to cover services excluded from the basket or for services above the basic standard. An agency will be established to regulate the competing insurance funds.

The passive acceptance of the brain drain of doctors must stop and working conditions and the training structure must become attractive, if this cannot be as good as elsewhere then at least it should be comparable. The National Medicine Examination must be reviewed and the EU standards on out of hours work, which has been delayed, must be implemented properly.

There will be changes in drug reimbursement policy with quarterly reviews and inclusion based on effectiveness and price comparison within the EU. The Prime

Minister specifically referred to the wish to include drugs for treatment of rare paediatric diseases.

There will be support for the disabled to achieve their full employment potential and the Prime Minister will ask the President to ratify the 2006 UN Convention on Rights of the Disabled. The government will introduce antidiscrimination legislation.

References

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3. Umowa koalicyjna 23 listopada 2007 (Coalition Agreement 23 November 2007)
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