

Headline	Greek tragedy waiting to happen		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	28 Dec 2011	Color	Black/white
Section	Local News	Circulation	136,530
Page No	24,25	Readership	330,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	366 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 5,068
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 15,204



Greek tragedy waiting to happen

LIFE OR DEATH SITUATION: Greece's healthcare system is falling apart as it struggles to finance debts and cut costs, writes Suzanne Daley

THE free clinic in Perama opened about a year ago to serve illegal immigrants. But these days, it is mostly caring for Greeks like Vassiliki Ragamb, who was sitting in the waiting room hoping to get insulin for her young diabetic son.

Four days earlier, she had run out of insulin and, without insurance and unable to pay for more, she had gone from drugstore to drugstore, pleading for at least enough for a few days. It took her three hours to find a pharmacist who was willing to help.

"I tried a lot of them," she said, gazing at the floor.

Greece used to have an extensive public healthcare system that pretty much ensured that everybody

was covered for everything. But in the last two years, the nation's creditors have pushed hard for dramatic cost savings to cut back the deficit.

These measures are taking a brutal toll on the system and on the country's growing numbers of poor and unemployed who cannot afford the new fees and co-payments instituted at public hospitals as part of the far-reaching austerity drive.

At public hospitals, doctors report shortages of all kinds of supplies, from toilet paper to catheters to syringes. Computerised equipment has gone unrepaired and is no longer in use. Nurses are handling four times the patients they should, and waiting times for operations — even cancer surgeries — have grown longer.

Access to drugs has also been affected, as some drug manufac-

turers, owed tens of millions of dollars, are no longer willing to supply Greek hospitals. At the same time, pharmacists, afraid that the government might not reimburse them, are asking for cash payments, even from those with insurance.

Many experts say that Greece's public health system was bloated and corrupt and in dire need of reform. But they say also that the cuts have been so deep and have come so fast, that they have hit like a tsunami.

In just two years, the government has cut spending on healthcare to US\$17 billion (RM53 billion) from US\$19.5 billion — a 13 per cent decrease. And under its agreement

with its creditors, Greece must find even more healthcare savings next year — as much as US\$915 million.

At the same time, public health facilities have seen a 25 to 30 per cent increase in patients because so many Greeks can no longer afford to visit private clinics.

Dr Olatz Ugarte, an anaesthesiologist at the Saint Savvas Cancer Hospital in Athens, said that breast cancer patients often have to wait three months now to have tumours removed.

"Waiting that long can be life or death for these patients," she said.

In a recent letter to the medical journal *The Lancet*, a team of English researchers warned that a "Greek tragedy" could be in the making, pointing to rising suicide and HIV rates and deterioration of services at hospitals under financial pressure.

"In an effort to finance debts," the researchers said, "ordinary people are paying the ultimate price: losing access to care and preventive services; facing higher risks of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, and in the worst case, losing their lives."

At the Perama clinic, which is run by the international non-profit

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Doctors of the World, doctors say they are seeing many families who cannot afford bus fare, let alone the new US\$6.50 fee at public clinics.

Technically, those Greeks who cannot pay are entitled to free care. But the bureaucracy can be overwhelming. Ragamb, a former hairdresser whose unemployment benefits and health insurance ran out six months ago, said she was still waiting to get the right papers.

The story did not surprise Dr Liana Mailli, the paediatrician who was seeing Ragamb's son, Elias. The 3-year-old got a diagnosis of diabetes only a few months ago, after he fell into a coma. Dr Mailli has heard of such bureaucratic troubles from many patients. Even more often, she said, parents had fallen behind in paying their health insurance contributions, or their employers do not pay and so they were no longer covered.

One development that Dr Mailli

said she found particularly disturbing was that a growing number of children had not had their basic vaccinations.

If nothing is done, she said, polio, diphtheria and whooping cough could all return to Greece.

"This is such a serious thing. But these vaccines are expensive."

At the start of its debt crisis, Greece was spending about six per cent of its gross domestic product on healthcare — about average for Europe. But the system was far from efficient. It includes many small hospitals and a reliance on expensive brand name drugs.

Moreover, there was widespread corruption. Experts say doctors often had lucrative deals with drug manufacturers that led them to vastly overprescribe, and many expected cash payments on the side for timely and attentive care.

Since the debt crisis began in

2009, the government has frozen hiring, cut salaries and focused on tracking prescriptions and new procurement procedures. About 20 doctors have been arrested for corruption.

But little has gone smoothly.

Government officials acknowledge some problems, but say that the system was simply unsustainable. In the next year, they say, adjustments can be made.

But many doctors say the new emphasis on cutting costs has gone too far. In addition to shortages, they say that the supplies they do have are of poor quality. They complain that bugs have been found in new syringes imported from China, sutures fall apart and generic drugs do not seem to do the job. And the hiring freeze has caused such a shortage of nurses, some doctors said, that procedures frequently have to be postponed. **NYT**