Availability of Ophthalmologic Services

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Summary

The State Audit Office audited the timely availability of ophthalmologic services or the waiting lists of ophthalmologists and the performance of the state in assuring the quality of provision of ophthalmologic services. The audit objective was to assess the performance of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonian Health Insurance Fund and the Health Care Board in assuring the availability of health services.

The speciality of ophthalmology was audited for the reason that regardless of the system for partial provision of alternative services by private practitioners and optics stores the waiting lists of ophthalmologists are still very long. According to the waiting list information, provided to the Health Fund Service by medical institutions, in the beginning of April this year, the largest number of people (6,216 individuals) has to remain on the waiting list for special medical care longer than the allowed period (4 weeks) to see the ophthalmologist.

Main Observations

The waiting lists of ophthalmologists differ considerably both by regions and within one region. Waiting lists to get to the initial ambulatory reception of ophthalmologist can differ from one day to 3.5 months in different medical institutions. Long waiting lists are mostly a problem of regional character. Information concerning the providers of respective services and the length of their waiting lists is not available to a patient.

The quality of waiting list information collected leaves to be desired. Waiting list information, forwarded to the Estonian Health Fund Service by medical institutions, does not allow to assess the real availability of the services and the demand to be satisfied. Insufficiency of the respective information can be blamed on both the medical institutions and the format for gathering information. Medical institutions are restricting the options for getting registered on the waiting list (one can get registered only for a certain period) and the data submitted is not always reliable (the vacancy is shown as available on a date where there's no reception hours at all or the information submitted differs considerably from the real situation). The format, applied by the Estonian Health Fund Service for data collection, does not allow to assess the waiting lists of different policlinics administrated by one hospital.

Ophthalmologists are working at optics stores where the patients won't get any treatment, as a rule. The number of ophthalmologists in Estonia meets the number set out in the development plan of that respective speciality. According to the survey conducted by the State Audit Office, 65% of ophthalmologists work at least part-time in optics stores where the services rendered can't be compared to the reception in a medical institution. 24% of the total reception hours of ophthalmologists are attributable to shops. Commercials promoting ophthalmologist's reception in optics stores are often misleading the patent because as a rule, only the technical service for determining the sharpness of vision if offered.

Supervision over the organisation of granting of activity licenses at the Health Care Board and operations of providers of services is insufficient. The state has failed to assure the patients that all the medical institutions are capable of providing quality services. Activity permits are being granted without on-the-spot inspection of the applicant. The role of optics stores and their opportunities and obligations within the system of provision of health care services have not been determined.

Main recommendations given to the Minister of Social Affairs by the State Audit Office We're making the following proposals to the Minister of Social Affairs to improve the availability of ophthalmologic services and assure the quality of services provided:

- to determine the role of optics stores as providers of ophthalmologic services to gain a clear picture of their obligations and accountability within the health care system or without thereof. People need to be aware of the scope of the services provided by optics stores and their responsibilities.
- to assure that the patients won't be offered misleading information concerning the ophthalmologist's reception hours at an optics store. If the doctors only act as optometricians

and fail to provide any actual health care services, the respective services shouldn't be advertised as reception hours of an ophthalmologist.

- to assure that all the providers of health care services (incl. optics stores) would meet the established requirements and would be registered as providers of services.
- to determine the role of family physicians as providers of ophthalmologic services. The Ministry of Social Affairs should review the basic procedures and examinations conducted by a family physician and explain what is the task division between family physicians and ophthalmologists. The list of services payable from the capitation fees should not include any services that are not or can't be provided by a family physician.
- To inspect prior to granting activity license for the provision of health care services whether the applicant is capable of the provision of services in the location shown on he application. Both the activity license issued and the register of activity licenses should indicate unanimously in which location the services may be rendered.
- To request that the applicant, when applying for an activity license, would attach a written consent of a health care worker to work at the applicant to the documents and data submitted. Such a requirement would avoid a situation of the doctors being unaware of being registered as working for some of the applicants while contributing to better supervision.

Main recommendations given to the Management of the Estonian Health Insurance Fund by the State Audit Office We're hereby making the following proposals to the Estonian Health Care Fund to for better informing of the patients of the providers of health care services and waiting lists and to obtain better quality information for the administration of the contracts regulating the funding or services:

- to disclose the information regarding contracting partners at the website in the Internet, accompanied with information concerning their speciality, the location for the provision of services and the assumed length of waiting list by each specialty. Disclosure of such information would help the patient to find the closest provider of services or the one with the waiting list of the most suitable length.
- To gather and disclose information concerning waiting lists not only by contracting partners but also by single policlinics. For patients it is important to be aware of the waiting list of every specific policlinic so as to choose the provider of services with the shortest waiting list.
- To control more rigorously whether the waiting list information, submitted by a medical institution, is correct so as to avoid any errors in data received.

Responses given by the Minister of Social Affairs and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund

Neither the Minister of Social Affairs nor the Estonian Health Insurance Fund had no essential objections to the proposals made by the State Audit Office. Full version of the answers is given in the annex to the report.

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