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## Consolidating hospital care in Romania: what does this mean, and how can two examples help us find a way forward?

*11th of August 2023*



The month of July uncovered a number of problems in Romania's hospital care system that have disturbed and captured the attention of the public opinion.

An example is the case of a woman who gave birth on the sidewalk in front of the Urziceni Municipal Hospital, after she went to the hospital and, because there was no gynaecologist on duty, waited outside for an ambulance.

Among the explanations offered by hospital management was the shortage of medical staff in the hospital. However, if we take a closer look at the overall picture, this phenomenon is faced by a large number of medical institutions in Romania, but also in the whole European region.

Therefore, more than ever at such times, one question naturally arises: what kind of changes can be made to prevent such occurrences within hospital healthcare?

In the study carried out over the last 2 years in Romania in the framework of the Pillars of Health project (here you can [access the research report](#)), which investigated the main factors influencing the decision of doctors and nurses to migrate, several elements stand out as possible leads for the answers we are seeking for concerning the hospital healthcare system.

One first aspect that has been identified, although evident, but that remains deficient in the Romanian health system is the modernisation of hospital infrastructure. Moreover, it is imperative for medical staff to practise their medical act with dignity, in good conditions and in a suitable working environment. This has been pointed out many times in interviews with the health professionals taking part in the study: *"We need hospitals. Because the ones we work in now are hospitals only on paper, although we try to meet accreditation standards. They're old and they're not at all in line with the current state of medicine. We make it work on paper, but the reality is different."* (Head of ward in Romania, female doctor)

A factor that is often overlooked and which could represent the primary explanation for the situation in the example of Urziceni Municipal Hospital is the lack of effective communication between medical staff and patients. Thus, the system in itself often fails to be intelligible to patients, who get lost in the unknown when they have to interact with it. This catalyses the importance of "knowing" someone on the inside, someone to guide you and help you solve problems: "*Entering the system is a drama.*" (Professional organisation representative, nurse, female)

With regards to the medical team, workplace relationships can lack positivity and may instead involve various conflicting situations that affect the work climate and ultimately the quality of care. On the one hand, nurses share such experiences and characterise the healthcare system as rather paternalistic, relying on the unquestionable authority of doctors: "*The nurse does what the doctor says. They do nothing - they don't talk, they don't move, they don't do anything on their own initiative. Everything has to be dictated by the doctor.*" (Representative of a professional association, nurse in Romania, female). On the other hand, doctors sometimes feel that nurses fail to adapt to what is new in terms of treatment and procedures and fail to respect their authority. Furthermore, the theme of intra- and inter-disciplinary team cooperation appears recurrently: "*Another aspect that is very deficient here: we don't work as a team. We work individually. We see this in the work of the nurses. They are not trained to work as a team. They work chaotically and it is tiring. Everyone is frustrated at the end of the day.*" (Head of ward in Romania, female doctor)

Ultimately, what seems to be the deciding factor in the effective functioning of a medical institution is the management: "*It is very important who runs an institution. I have 34 years of experience and I have seen that this matters a lot. It all starts with the leaders. And if people collectively want to do more, then things will happen.*" (Head nurse in Romania, female)

Nevertheless, the exemplary models of effective organisation and operation, serving as case studies from which we can glean insights into formulating and adapting corrective measures, might be situated in close geographic proximity.

Thus, a comparable example is the Moineşti Municipal Emergency Hospital. To draw a parallel with what happened recently at Urziceni Municipal Hospital, we recall an article from 2022, when a mother shared her experience of giving birth at Moineşti Hospital: "*From the nurses to*



*the doctors, everyone was extraordinary and available to answer and help me with any question or problem I had. I didn't see eyes rolling, I wasn't rushed, I wasn't told to go to my room or wait when I was asking about the baby or when I went to get milk. (...) the food was fresh, and the baby was washed daily. If I couldn't get the milk, the nurse would come and bring it to the room. I was always asked, both myself and the other ladies in the ward, if everything was all right, if we needed anything.” [1].*

Although the city it serves has a population of only 20,000 inhabitants, the Moinești Hospital seems to be one of European standards. It benefits from modern equipment and satisfactory conditions. It also has a team of doctors who have returned from abroad to practice here. The hospital has been in operation for 47 years and its modernisation began in 2002. At present, the hospital has 7 wards and 17 compartments with beds, 120 doctors and is equipped with a heliport, hyperbaric chamber, and telemedicine system [2].

But how did they manage to reach this level, given that two decades ago this hospital was on the verge of bankruptcy?

A preliminary answer is also highlighted by the respondents to the study conducted by the Pillars of Health project in Romania: a type of forward-thinking management that demonstrates a willingness to exert significant endeavours in pursuit of clearly defined objectives, that has steered the institution for a considerable duration, allowing it to have a deep understanding of its needs, to develop action plans and to maintain their consistency over time.

As the story of this hospital tells us, Prof. Dr. Adrian Cotîrleț has been the hospital manager for more than 17 years, and his managerial activity is an illustration of a well-known Romanian expression that would roughly translate to "A good man can make even a desert bloom". During this period, he has worked towards creating good working conditions and improving the hospital infrastructure, applying for funding from the ministry, the town hall and the local council. He has accessed European funds and worked with organisations in France, the Netherlands and Norway, which have contributed more than €8 million for renovations.

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[[1] [Ziarul de Bacău, 2022](#)

[2] <https://www.spitalmoinesti.ro/>

As far as the medical team is concerned, Moinești hospital has built a strong and cohesive team, which was based on a shift in employee mindset and behaviour. This stage created the foundation for subsequent changes, manifested by an approach oriented towards individual and collective needs [3]. This team is also strengthened and supported constantly, through the organisation of internal communication workshops and the promotion and encouragement of multidisciplinary participation in continuous medical education courses focused on communication and counselling. This approach confirms one of the solutions validated as essential for strengthening hospital healthcare in Romania within the Pillars of Health project as well.

Fundamentally, in this illustration, we observe two hospital units sharing remarkably similar premises: both are located in small towns with a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants, in counties on the outskirts of the university centres, which are subordinate to local public administrations. However, their trajectories have followed very different paths and are perceived differently by the patients who step on their doorstep.

The example provided by the hospital in Moinești underlines the need for a consistent and coordinated approach within the hospital healthcare system, with constant efforts to address deep, systematic problems: *"A good quality medical act must have a well-trained medical team, have state-of-the-art technological support and, last but not least, offer good hotel comfort to those who cross our doorstep"* (Prof. Dr. Adrian Cotîrleț, manager) [4].

Beyond these examples that demonstrate how affordable, but also how complex are the solutions to strengthen hospital healthcare in Romania, for more details on the topics discussed and the findings of the research on the factors influencing the migration of Romanian health workers, the analysis of their personal work experiences, as well as the solutions identified by respondents for the retention and return of health workers, we encourage you to also browse the position paper on human resources in health. (that can be accessed [here](#)).

The Pillars of Health Romania team

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[3] [Medica Academica, 2022](#)

[4] [Digi24, 2019](#)