

Impact of Austerity on Public Health and the emerging Role of Public Health Nursing: Lessons learnt from Greece

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Editorial

During the last 4 years, Greece has experienced an austerity period that has severely affected health care services and the Greek population, while it has been characterized by literature as "a Greek Tragedy"[1]. Considerable impacts of austerity have been observed in infections (HIV) and vaccination coverage as well as in the access to healthcare services and the use of medications [2-5], whereas a great proportion of the Greek population is still not receiving continuous and personalized care. Efforts undertaken the past years are focused primarily on short term effects through the reduction of expenditures. However, they appear to be ineffective to restore the Greek health care system [6]. Current health policy discussions concentrate on the re-organization of primary care services by focusing on the first contact and personalized care and by giving central role in health care practitioners with a specific reference to public health nurses. This lies on the same direction with the paper issued by Simon et al on reinventing primary care in Greece during the austerity period in which health workers have been assigned a key role which seems to be a key priority.[7]. The above discussions are based on the central role of public health nursing and raise issues about its impact on the new challenges that the Greek primary care system is likely to confront.

During the past years, several attempts have been made to achieve a more modern and better Greek NHS in relation to primary care. However, these attempts have been found as deficient in clear outcomes, including quality. The performance of primary care services in Greece has also been criticized for the disproportionate or inordinate time required in prescribing, repeating prescriptions and ordering diagnostic tests mostly due to the lack of integration [8]. In addition, a recently published report focuses on the emerging role of general practitioners/ family physicians in Greece during austerity period [9]. Specifically, the role of nursing in general and particular has received only a limited interest and importance during the discussions of reforms in primary care, while either the current law or recent reforms were mainly focused on the role of physicians. Notara et al in their

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published paper [10], consider economic crisis as an opportunity for the establishment of health care reform policies. Specifically, they reveal the role of health care professionals, minimize the impact of the crisis and mostly remove inequalities in health services. Teamwork and multidisciplinary work are still frail in both the public and private health care sector, while public health care nursing has not received the attention that deserves and community nurses who serve population are still seeking to achieve training and recognition of their role [11,12]. All the above may contribute, among others, to the reasons why Greece ranked low when quality and performance in PHC was mapped by European comparative studies [13]. The contribution of public health nursing to the improvement of the quality and outcomes of the primary care services has received a prompt attention by the eight technological departments and the two University nursing departments of Greece while certain collaborative research and training programs with a focus on primary care have been initiated.

In conjunction with the above, research in primary health care in Greece still remains restricted in a few academic and clinical centers, the academic disciplines prevailing in primary health care are still looking for recognition [14], while the need for more reports from public health nursing is considered necessary. Practice-based research and networking, is an important resource in assessing population health needs and improving quality of care. However, in terms of family medicine it is still limited in activities mostly carried out in a particular region of Greece, although a theoretical framework has been discussed a couple of years ago [15]. Despite the growing body of knowledge deriving from the quality of RCTs designed by nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists [16], the nurses' involvement in intervention studies in primary care is of high priority, especially in a country like Greece. However, in contemporary Greece there are collaborative and funded research projects, which focus on the role of community nursing in primary care, whilst the first published results are anticipated.

The clinical relevance as well as the impact on quality care services in the light of financial crisis and its implication on health are included on the following major themes: co-morbidity and frailty, self-management and home care, patient-centeredness with a focus on doctor-patient communication, migrant health and compassion in health care. All these major issues have been nearly neglected in the current agenda and certainly general practice has more than one issue to resolve while discipline of public health nursing needs to be discussed in plenary sessions.

In a time when the new government of Greece is discussing the new health care reform in primary care, there is much room to bring to light and focus on public health nursing. To that direction, it is important to involve nursing in the health care policy issues following the words of Judith Shamian, President of ICN (2013-2017): "*Each of you must join the debate, secure a seat at the policy table and make the voice of nursing heard. Without that voice, policy will be incomplete*" [17].

It is shameful to witness the quality of primary care services in Greece to be on the target of negative commentary due to its low performance in all major components of patient centered care including continuity, comprehensiveness and coordination. However, nurses "*are the cornerstone of healthcare delivery that is focused on person-centeredness, continuity of care, comprehensiveness and integration of services which are fundamental to holistic care*" [18].

Greek PHC at the current time requires redirection of its focus and the upgrading of the current services with new type of services based on interdisciplinary work. A focus on

health promotion and disease prevention on the basis of self management looks as a suitable field, where interdisciplinary work and integration could be tested. Nowadays, public health nursing considers as a high priority and challenge to show and prove its effectiveness and capacity in the effort to satisfy the new health care needs.

The EU, throughout the HORIZON 2020 funding project, focuses on self-management as a tool to promote and maintain health as well as on frailty to reduce the burden of morbidity and mortality. Consequently the role of public health nursing becomes the core in the management of community health care. However, there is evidence that nurse-managed protocols have positive effects on the outpatient management of adults with common chronic conditions as it is type 2 diabetes, hypertension, lipids disorders and chronic heart failure [19]. It clearly indicates that community nurses are in ideal position to collaborate with family doctors and other primary care practitioners to provide patient-centered care at the community setting [19,20]. The clearly recognized inequalities in the health care services and the re-emerged health care needs of Greek population [21, 22], seek for a more effective policy in which public health nursing service will serve an active and decisive role.

Keywords: Public health nursing, primary care, development, quality improvement, austerity, Greece

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