

Urgent medical aid for undocumented migrants in Belgium

Summary of the study

Aim of the study

In April-May 2015 researchers of the Université catholique de Louvain and the Ghent University interviewed undocumented migrants about the procedures and appreciation of urgent medical aid. The interviews were conducted as part of a study launched by the Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre (KCE).

We were looking for the problems that undocumented migrants may encounter when gaining access to urgent medical aid or to health care after having obtained the right to urgent medical aid. Our research team also had group discussions with health professionals and social workers of hospitals and community health centres about their experiences with urgent medical aid.

Presentation of the participants in the interviews

Thirty-three people were interviewed: 12 people in Flanders (6 in Ghent and 6 in Antwerp), 11 people in Wallonia (6 in Liege and 5 in Charleroi) and 10 people in Brussels. Thirty-two people had no valid residence documents and one person had a temporary residence permit at the time of the interview. We interviewed 17 women and 16 men. The majority was between 26 and 55 years old and lived more than five years in Belgium. We have spoken to people from all over the world (Africa, the Maghreb and the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Asia and Latin America). Twenty-one people have kids, but not everyone lived with his / her children.

Key findings

The interviews led to various findings and testimonies. Here we summarize the four major issues that both undocumented migrants and health professionals who care for them are facing.

- [1] The first problem is the **unclear definition of "urgent medical aid"**: undocumented migrants do not always know what will be refunded through the procedure of urgent medical aid. Even health professionals do not always know what urgent medical aid entails. This situation is very difficult and often leads to anxiety. Sometimes undocumented migrants do not get the care that they deserve or need.
- [2] The second problem relates to the **lack of information and communication**. Undocumented migrants do not always know where they should seek treatment or what information they should give to the health professionals. The employees of the public welfare centres are not always friendly and respectful of the undocumented migrants and do not always help to give them the necessary help.
- [3] The third problem is the **complexity and length of the procedure for urgent medical aid**. Often it is necessary to wait long for the decision. The social enquiry is very detailed and intrusive for undocumented migrants. For some it is even very difficult to specify their residence to the public welfare centre, which gives problems to get urgent medical aid.
- [4] The fourth issue has to do with the fact that **decisions vary depending on the social workers or health workers**. Undocumented migrants do not get the same help in every public welfare centre. The care given may even vary from health service to health service and from pharmacy to pharmacy, or can even be refused because the undocumented migrants are helped by the public welfare centre.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews with undocumented migrants and the group discussions with health professionals the strengths and weaknesses of the procedures of urgent medical aid were analysed. We have made recommendations to the Belgian authorities to improve access and quality of health care for undocumented migrants.

Among the numerous recommendations in the report, we mention here the four most important ones.

- [1] A **clear definition of Urgent Medical Aid** which also takes into account the fact that one may need care before (s)he gets really ill and that care should cover all health problems, especially for certain groups, such as children and pregnant women
- [2] **Qualitative information in different languages** for undocumented migrants is needed, but better information for the public welfare staff and health professionals is needed as well so that they can provide better assistance to undocumented migrants
- [3] A **simplification of the procedure**, including greater equality between the different municipalities, a shortening of the duration of the procedure and simplification of the social enquiry
- [4] **Respect for the law on social assistance and urgent medical aid**, respect for patients' rights, respect for privacy, and a condemnation of social workers and health professionals who do not respect these laws.

Proposed reform

The Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre has supplemented our findings with a detailed analysis of the current situation and a comparison of urgent medical aid for undocumented migrants in our neighbouring countries. The KCE proposes a reform along two major lines: (1) to simplify and harmonize the administrative procedures of urgent medical aid, and (2) to respect access to health care for undocumented migrants and the rational use of public resources.

At the moment (March 2016) the reform proposal is studied closely by the relevant bodies, such as the PPS Social Integration, the National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance (RIZIV), the Federal Public Service Health, the Auxiliary Sickness and Invalidity Insurance Fund (HZIV) and the Association of Cities and Municipalities.

Additional information

The [full report](#) (in English) and the [synthesis report](#) (in English, French and Dutch) of the study are available on the website of the Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre: <https://kce.fgov.be/publication/report/what-health-care-for-undocumented-migrants-in-belgium#.VvOhoY-cGuW>.

A short video of the findings (in [French](#) and [Dutch](#) only) can be watched as well.

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