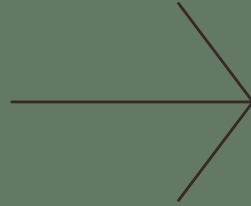


Challenges to healthcare system in Chalki and other remote Greek islands

Online interview with the Deputy Mayor of Chalki, Vasilis Rousakis



The health system in remote Greek islands

The health system in remote Greek islands can vary depending on the specific island and its resources. However, in general, these islands have limited healthcare facilities and services, which can pose a challenge for residents and visitors who require medical attention.

Many of the smaller islands have only basic health clinics staffed by a general practitioner or nurse, and many of them do not even have the resources to provide more advanced medical treatment or specialized care. In cases of more serious illness or injury, patients may need to be transported to a larger hospital on the mainland, which can be time consuming and expensive.



Some problems regarding health that Greek remote islands face:

Limited healthcare facilities: Many small and remote Greek islands have limited healthcare facilities, which can be insufficient to meet the needs of residents and visitors.

Shortage of medical staff: Some Greek islands have a shortage of medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers, which can lead to overstaffed and overburdened clinics.

Difficulty in accessing specialized care: Patients on remote Greek islands may have difficulty accessing specialized medical care and treatments due to limited resources and the need for transportation to urban areas.

Budget constraints: Healthcare facilities on Greek islands may face budget constraints that limit their ability to invest in infrastructure and equipment, recruit and retain staff and provide essential services.



Examples of Greek remote islands facing health system problems

Fourni: Fourni is a small island complex in the eastern Aegean Sea with a population of around 1,500 people. The island has only one health centre staffed by a general practitioner, and patients with serious medical conditions often have to be transported to a hospital on a nearby island.

Lesvos: Lesvos is a large island in the northeastern Aegean Sea, which shares borders with Turkey. It has a population of approximately 86,000 people and has been dealing with an influx of refugees in recent years, which has put additional strain on its healthcare system.

Samothrace: Samothrace is a small island in the northern Aegean Sea, located near Turkey. The island has a population of 2,700 people and may face challenges in providing adequate healthcare services for its small population.

Symi: Symi is a small island in the southeastern Aegean Sea, located near Turkey. The island has a population of approximately 2,500 people and faces challenges in accessing specialized medical treatments and services due to its remote location.



General Information about Chalki

Chalki (also spelled Halki) is a small Greek island located in the Aegean Sea, about 6 kms west of Rhodes. It is part of the Dodecanese island group and has a population of approximately 330 people.

Chalki has a rich history and was an important center for sponge diving in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, the island's main industries include fishing and tourism, with visitors attracted to its quiet beaches and charming village atmosphere.



The health system in Chalki

One of the primary challenges for healthcare in Chalki is the island's small population size. With only around 300 permanent residents, it may be difficult to justify the expense of maintaining a full-time medical facility with specialized medical staff. As a result, residents may have to travel to nearby islands or the mainland for more complex medical treatments and procedures.

Additionally, Chalki's remote location can make it challenging to transport patients to larger medical facilities in a timely manner in case of emergencies. The island does have a small medical clinic that provides basic healthcare services, but it may not be equipped to handle more serious medical issues.

Furthermore, due to Chalki's small population, it may be difficult to attract and retain medical professionals to work on the island. Therefore, the medical staff in the island's clinic may have limited experience and expertise in specialized areas of medicine.



Online interview with the Deputy Mayor of Chalki, Vasilis Rousakis

Q1: We would like you to talk to us about the healthcare system for the residents of the island. Firstly, we would like to ask if the system is private or public on the island.

A: Sure! Firstly, I would like to make a brief introduction and then answer your question. Chalki is an island of the southeastern Aegean in the island complex of the Dodecanese. There are 250 permanent residents on the island. As for healthcare, there is only public mental care. In fact, there is a regional polyclinic, at least that's what we call it, but in terms of staffing there is only one rural doctor and a nurse.

Q2: So, is it like a small health center?

A: Yes, that's correct!

Q3: Do all residents have access to it?

A: All residents have access to it, despite the difficulties we face, especially during the winter months. The reason is that in many emergency situations and in situations that are difficult for the rural doctors to handle, they are transported by air ambulance, using a Super Puma, which is called in cases of emergency.



Q4: In what field does the biggest shortage occur? (eg. specialty, equipment)

A: The biggest problem is the lack of staff. There is equipment that can be used, but there is a shortage in specialties that could facilitate the situation. There is a rural doctor who has the basic knowledge, but he lacks experience as he has just finished his studies. He struggles to identify exactly the cases, resulting in the need for immediate transfer to Rhodes in order for a general practitioner to better evaluate the cases. Especially in the winter, due to the lack of a general practitioner who could treat patients in Chalki, a time consuming and dangerous transfer to Rhodes by Super Puma is required. In many cases, the rural doctor is also afraid to take responsibility and most patients are forced to undergo this procedure. The inhabitants feel insecure during the winter months because communication with the hospital in Rhodes is not frequent. The prohibitions due to bad weather also contribute to this insecurity.



Q5: What happens in the case of pregnant women?

A: During the ninth month of pregnancy, pregnant women leave the island to be ready to go to hospital. For example, a recent incident was that a woman, probably trying to avoid the expenses of her stay and transportation to Rhodes, stayed in Chalki until the last moment, resulting in an unexpected birth with the help of the rural doctor who had not faced such an incident before. At the same time, due to bad weather, the woman could not leave the island. Confusion arose and we had to call the ambulance and the super puma, which arrived late and the woman was forced to give birth on the island.



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Q6: Are these incidents rare?

A: Yes, they are. They usually go to Rhodes. The incident with the pregnant woman was a bad one because it was winter and it could have been avoided if they had left a week earlier.

Q7: What are the most common health problems that the residents of the island face?

A: They face mild incidents and are forced to go to the health centre in Chalki. As I have already mentioned, the difficulty lies in whether the doctor can handle the incident or not. The doctors there are young and inexperienced so they have to send you to Rhodes even for a minor pain that they cannot diagnose. We don't have the proper equipment so incidents, such as a broken leg, cannot be handled.

Q8: Are there any factors that affect the residents' health positively or negatively?

A: Because of the aging population of the island, the aspect of isolation affects their psychology to a great extent. Many residents stay on the island all year round without their families and this is the reason why many mental health issues are observed.





Q9: We read that the first pharmacy opened in Chalki by a pharmacist in Athens about a year ago. Can you tell us a few words about it?

A: Panagiotis Patelis, a young man, decided to leave Athens and open a pharmacy in Chalki about a year ago. He recognised the need for a pharmacy on the island and took the initiative to make it happen. The opening of the pharmacy has helped the island residents tremendously. Prior to its establishment, people had to borrow medicine from others or order from Rhodes, which would take two to three days to arrive. Having a pharmacy on the island has been incredibly important, and everyone does their best to ensure its sustainability.

Q10: Are there drug shortages now?

A: No, it's better. The pharmacist is aware of the resident's prescriptions, so there is stock available. For example, I have told him that I take specific medication every month, so he makes sure to have them in stock. He is therefore, knowledgeable of the needs of all residents.

Q11: Is Panagiotis satisfied?

A: Yes, a lot!

Q12: What happened with the supply of medicines before the opening of the pharmacy?

A: We used to get our prescriptions on the island of Rhodes, and they would send them to us by a small boat or ship. Each person had to go to the post office to deposit the money, which was difficult for the elderly.



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Q12: In case someone needed something urgently, were there any basic medicines available?

A: The local health centre has the basic medicines, but not a wide variety, that could help someone for several days. The doctor at the clinic can provide a resident with the medication they need and then they should bring it back so as to be available again for someone else who needs it. Still the medication available isn't enough to cover the needs of the residents of the whole island.

Q13: Have you come up with any solutions to the health system problem?

A: It is an issue that not only residents here face, but also many small islands in Greece and small mountainous municipalities whose residents are obliged to go to hospitals elsewhere. So, this is something that needs to be solved by the government. As a municipality, the only thing we can do is to send letters to the government in order to sensitize it about our problems. It is very difficult for an experienced doctor to give up their comfort and the chances of personal development and here or to any remote area. One solution that could be given by the government is army doctors who could be forced to come here and provide the island with medical care for two years.



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Q14: Do individuals contribute through donations or are there any other organizations that help?

A: According to legislation, the municipality of Chalki and even the South Aegean region can cover accommodation expenses. Also, additional allowances are given to someone who chooses such municipalities to go to. The problem is that doctors are not willing to come here and work.

Q15: So, maybe that's why there are no private clinics on the island. It's admirable for this newcomer to decide to open a pharmacy there.

A: It is very important that this person has decided to make a fresh start in a place they are not familiar with even if they know that they may face some difficulties.

Q16: Is tourism negatively affected by all these issues?

A: Not so much. Tourists usually bring their medication with them. In case of emergency, the municipality tries to help tourists by contacting another pharmacy and ordering their medicines. Potential tourists are aware of the situation on the island. As for the health issue, we deal with that in the same way we do with every permanent resident of the island. So, I believe tourism is not affected.



Q17: Do young people choose to leave the island because of the health system issues? Are there any young people living there permanently?

A: Not so many. However, most of them don't leave because of the health system challenges they have to face, but because of the lack of job opportunities. There are no jobs for someone to work throughout the year.

Q18: Are people worried about this situation?

A: Of course! I will give you a personal example. When I am in Chalki I feel great insecurity. Chalki is heavily affected by southern, southeastern and southwestern winds, and during the winter period the winds are really strong resulting in prohibitions due to bad weather. This means that there is no communication with the hospital in Rhodes.



Photographs from our school trip to Chalki



Sources

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Thank you for your attention!!

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