

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ON IMPROVING THE HEALTH STATUS OF ROMA

The pilot research on the health status of Roma and the information collected by various NGOs clearly indicate the severity of the health problems within the Roma community. Society, however, is largely unaware of these problems and does too little to solve them. All efforts in this direction seem fragmentary. The cooperation among the different NGOs, the Ministry of Healthcare, the regional hospitals and the local governments is still unsatisfactory.

In order to overcome these challenges Roma nurses, doctors and physician assistants, Roma and non-Roma NGO activists, representatives of the Ministry of Healthcare, prominent Bulgarian physicians, etc. should come together to develop a comprehensive national strategy for improving the health status of Roma, which should be included in the National Framework Program for the Integration of Roma in Bulgaria.

Such a national strategy could be put into practice through different programs addressing the most serious health problems of the Roma community:

1. A program for early diagnosis and effective treatment of tuberculosis
2. A program for preventing viral hepatitis and other sexually transmitted diseases
3. A program for optimizing vaccinations
4. A program for preventing gynecological diseases
5. A program for genetic prophylaxis of hereditary diseases in the Roma community
6. A program for providing equal access to healthcare and social services to chronically ill and disabled Roma
7. A program for improving the health education of the members of the Roma community
8. A reproductive health and sexual education program
9. A program for treating drug dependence

The involvement of the Roma medical staff and the experience of the NGOs are instrumental for the success of these programs. In order to improve the access of Roma to healthcare services, the community should have its own representatives in the Ministry of Healthcare and the National Health Insurance Fund. An effective approach to overcoming discrimination in the provision of healthcare services is to create advocacy groups and to introduce civic control on the quality of service. A proposal has been made to the Public Health Institute for a series of training courses for physicians working in the Roma community that would help overcome cultural differences and improve the communication with the patients.

An important step to solving the health problems of the community is the involvement of the Roma nurses, physician assistants and lab assistants (most of whom are unemployed), as well as the social workers, who could act as mediators between the Roma community and the healthcare institutions and the social services. Mediation could be acknowledged as a profession, as is the case in Romania.

We think that some amendments should be made to the Health Insurance Law and the Social Assistance Law, namely exempting socially disadvantaged people from fees, providing subsidized dental care, and giving some privileges to general practitioners and dentists working in the Roma neighborhoods.

Of course, the above suggestions and recommendations do not cover all that can be done to improve the health status of Roma. New ideas and proposals are welcome. We are convinced that together we can do more for the better health of Roma.