

TURKMENISTAN'S OPAQUE HEALTH SYSTEM

April 2010

Executive Summary

The people of Turkmenistan are being failed by their health-care system, by their government, and by the international community. The system that is supposed to ensure their health is instead designed to conceal problems. This is not a case of individual practitioners failing to do their jobs but one that is far more systematic.

Over a decade of working in the country, MSF experienced the Turkmen healthcare system as critically flawed by a lack of transparency from the point of delivery to the reporting of data. While the country is covered by a network of hospitals, health houses and health posts, MSF saw access to them restricted by stigma and the fear of the consequences of illness. Increasingly, international protocols and standards are formally introduced to the country, but in MSF's experience these are rarely implemented. This has a significant impact on quality of care.

Indeed, practices witnessed by MSF in the country are likely creating more health problems than they address. The failure, in particular, to effectively address – or even acknowledge – communicable diseases such as tuberculosis (including MDR-TB), HIV and sexually transmitted infections is most likely compounding and expanding existing problems. The failure to collect and disseminate epidemiological information in a transparent way means that the government and the international community have no real visibility on the health situation of the population of Turkmenistan. Given the prevalence of drug-resistant tuberculosis in neighbouring countries, MSF fears a looming TB crisis in Turkmenistan, which without an immediate and significant intervention, will lead to a major medical and health crisis in the country with broader regional implications.

The change of regime since Berdimuhamedow came to power has not resulted in improvements to the healthcare situation. Despite the appearance of greater openness, real change has failed to occur. Instead, the greater engagement with the international community serves only to mask the continuation of old practices, including the manipulation of data. Indeed, international organisations help perpetuate the problems by giving a veneer of legitimacy to figures and practices that are not only ineffective but often dangerous.

In December 2009 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) took the difficult decision to close the last of its programmes in Turkmenistan. MSF was present in the country for more than ten years and had a unique opportunity to witness the challenges facing the healthcare system. This report uses this experience to shed light on some of the key issues in Turkmenistan's healthcare system and to raise concerns about the role of international actors in the country.

Key Recommendations

Among the myriad problems encountered by MSF during its work in the country, the following issues need most urgently to be addressed:

The rapid diagnosis and treatment of drug-resistant TB should be implemented immediately with the direct implication of international experts as implementation partners.

The failure to consistently and routinely test blood products for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Syphilis and HIV must be urgently investigated, and national directives implemented without delay.

International organisations must cease to report as fact data that are contradictory and should take their responsibility in actively promoting transparency in the health system.

Contact for information:

E-Mail: office@berlin.msf.org

Tel.: +49 (0) 30 - 700 130 0

Fax: +49 (0) 30 - 700 130 340

Internet: www.msf.org

