IMAGOLOGICAL ISSUES REGARDING THE REMUNERATION OF MEDICAL STAFF IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The public perception of the remuneration of those working within the medical sector reflects Romanian reality and it reveals the social, cultural, ideological and media framing of the issue. The purpose of the current study is to analyse the manner in which the media has perceived the healthcare wage increases and the legislation regarding public health worker remuneration during the timeframe of August 14, 2015 – May 18, 2016. The analysis is based on the assessment of a number of imagological indicators and sub-indicators. The media has primarily emphasized the financial feasibility aspect due to the powerful financial impact of the wage increases in the public health system. The main imagological vulnerability emerges from the lack of an appropriate legislative framework for the regulation of public health sector employees, together with the lack of a coherent human resources strategy which would include an emphasis on motivating the personnel. The latter is crucial for the reduction of the emigration of qualified personnel and the strategy would have to be based on a careful analysis of the resulting financial impact.*

INTRODUCTION

The Romanian health sector has been experiencing a major human resources crisis in recent years, with the country now employing the lowest number of medical staff in the European Union.(1) The main driver behind this important deficit is the emigration of health workers abroad, a trend that is in turn influenced by a number of key factors: the lack of appropriate motivational and financial incentives; insufficient infrastructure; inadequate working conditions in hospitals and health centres; insufficient or badly managed funds.(2)

Motivation plays a key role in the process, as the psychological factor that influences individual attitudes and behaviour.(3) There are several elements that require improvement in order to increase the work satisfaction of healthcare staff: coordinating financial rewards with job difficulty levels; improving working conditions; establishing clear guidelines for promotion and career advancement; promoting public recognition of the role played by healthcare workers; investing in the further development of hospitals and healthcare units.(4)

However, low and insufficient salaries represent the decisive factor behind the emigration of medical workers.(5) The salary for a doctor in Romania is 9 to 11 times lower than that of their counterpart in a developed country (for example in Germany or Great Britain).(6) The emigration of doctors and medical staff has a profound impact on the quality of medical services and it is negatively perceived by the mass media and public opinion.(7)

The public perception of the remuneration of those working within the medical sector reflects Romanian reality and it reveals the social, cultural, ideological and media framing of the issue.(8,9)

PURPOSE

The purpose of the current study is to analyse the media perception of the legislation regarding the remuneration and wage increases in the medical sector.

The objectives of this research include: (1) establishing the nature of the media image of healthcare staff; (2) evaluating the manner in which healthcare salaries are portrayed and framed; (3) identifying negative frames.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The media perception and image of healthcare salaries is hereby observed, structured and quantified using a clear system of perception indicators and sub-indicators.(10) The system of indicators and sub-indicators was constructed based on a content analysis of the original sources. The perception indicators (the unitary aspect of the law, rule of law, fairness and transparency, financial feasibility) allow us to define, characterize and investigate the above-mentioned perception. The sub-indicators are aggregated to produce the overall indicators and they describe in further detail this media perception, thereby increasing the accuracy of our measurement (table no. 1). The unitary character of the law category includes references to the following aspects: generating a uniform remuneration system for individuals with the same educational attainment, irrespective of their area of activity; the harmonization of the pay system for public employees (in accordance with the importance, complexity and educational requirements of their area of specialization); the establishment of base salaries (which represent a key component of final earnings); the scaling of base salaries (according to general criteria such as education levels, competencies, the social importance of the work, the diversity and complexity of work activities, the degree of responsibility and impact of work decisions, risk factors, potential conflicts of interest, the degree of work difficulty, networking effects, interactions with external factors, job prerequisites).

The category corresponding to rule of law seeks to capture the necessity of a relevant legal framework and its enforcement so that public employee salaries are solely

regulated by legal norms.

The fairness and transparency indicators aim to measure the creation of equal opportunities and equal remuneration for the same work, according to legal norms that are transparent and publicly available.

Financial feasibility represents the introduction of salary increases in a manner that decreases the percentage of GDP devoted to public sector employees.(11)

Table no. 1. Measurement indicators and sub-indicators

1.	Unitary character	2.	Rule of law
a.	Harmonising the healthcare pay system	a.	Regulatory quality
		b.	Regulating medical professions
b.	Establishing base salaries	c.	Legal hierarchy
c.	Scaling base salaries	d.	Continuity with previous legal framework
d.	Differentiating base salaries		
3.	Fairness and transparency	4.	Financial feasibility
a.	Transparency in establishing base salaries	a.	Wage increases
		b.	Estimated annual budget
b.	Equal opportunities	c.	Budget amendments
c.	Fair remuneration	d.	System maintenance
d.	Professional achievement		

In order to capture media perception, we analysed cumulative, dichotomous and structural image profiles. These were generated by analysing references (with references for each sub-indicator being classified as either positive or negative) from the most widely read on-line publications (12) for the time period spanning from August 14, 2015 to May 18, 2016. Our key phrases for identifying these profiles were "wage law", "doctor salaries", and "wage increases in the healthcare sector".

RESULTS

Based on the key phrases mentioned previously, we identified and analysed 113 media articles in total. 58 of these articles represented a negative framing of the issue. The number of articles centred on the issue of salaries in the healthcare sector diminished considerably in the aftermath of the government change in November 2015. The total number went down from 67 articles before the change to only 46 after it (over a longer period of time). The articles with a negative framing of the issue also decreased following the government change (from 59.7% of the total to 43.48%).

We identified 761 references corresponding to our indicators and sub-indicators. A majority of these references were negative in character (53.75%).

Media interest appears to be focused on the indicator related to "Financial feasibility" (36.53% of the references), while the „Unitary character of the law" indicator corresponds to a quarter of the total references.

A majority of the references for three of the four indicators are negative, which highlights an important image problem. The only indicator that reflects a predominantly positive image (56.44%) is the one associated with the "Unitary character of the law". For this indicator, all the sub-indicators reflect a generally positive perception, with a stronger effect for the sub-indicators "Establishing base salaries" and "Scaling base salaries". For the other two sub-indicators the difference between the number of positive and negative references are quite small (see figure no. 1).

**Figure no. 1. Unitary character – dichotomous primary profile**
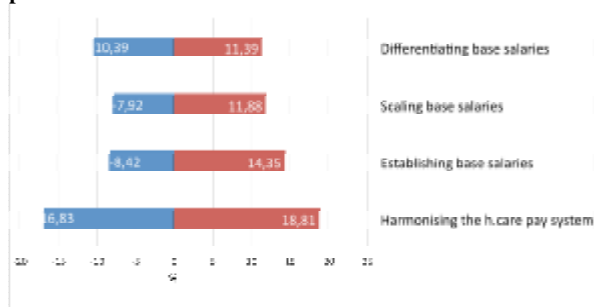
The category "Regulatory quality" received the most attention within the "Rule of law" indicator, aggregating over half of the total references within the composite indicator (54.54%). This sub indicator has a high percentage of negative references, with a media framing that includes 39.16% of negative portrayals. The difference between positive and negative references for the other 3 sub-indicators is insignificant. "Legal hierarchy" emerges as the only sub-indicator for "Rule of law" with a majority of positive references (see figure no. 2).

**Figure no. 2. Rule of law – dichotomous primary profile**
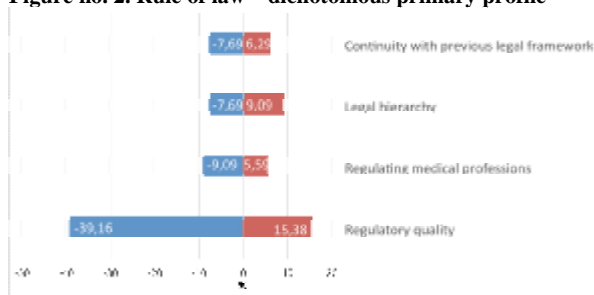
"Fairness and Transparency" is characterized by a negative framing for all its 4 sub-indicators. The sub-indicator "Fair remuneration" has attracted the most media attention with 31.88% of the references, followed closely by the sub-indicator for "Professional performance" (29.71%) (see figure no. 3).

Figure no. 3. Fairness and Transparency – dichotomous primary profile
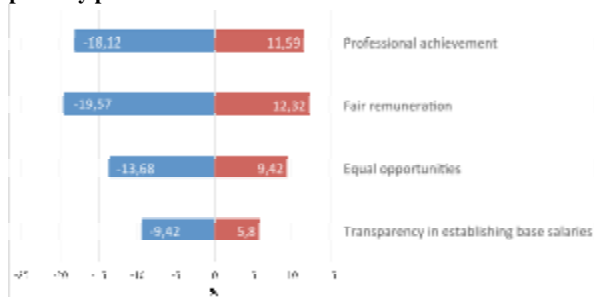
Finally, the "Financial feasibility" indicator displays a slightly negative framing. The "Wage increases" sub-indicator carries the highest difference between positive and negative references, with the positive frames outnumbering the negative ones (19.78%). It is followed by the "Budget amendments" sub-indicator for which negative and positive references carry almost equal weight. For the "Estimated annual budget" and "System maintenance" sub-indicators the negative references dominate (see figure no. 4).

Figure no. 4. Financial feasibility – dichotomous primary profile
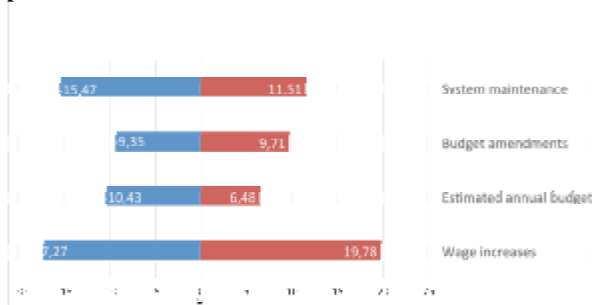
DISCUSSIONS

The imagological vulnerability regarding the remuneration of medical staff emerges in this study from the significant negative media framing and from the lack of media emphasis on the indicators related to "Fairness and Transparency" and "Rule of law". In addition to their reduced presence in the media discourse, these two indicators also receive a predominantly negative framing. The most important point related to the "Rule of law" indicator is the highly negative perception of "Regulatory quality", which receives the highest proportion of negative references. The strong media criticism of aspects related to this sub-indicator appears to highlight an important vulnerability.

The negative image related to aspects of the rule of law is also influenced by the budgetary wage regulations implemented through Law no. 248/2010 during the time-frame relevant for this study.(13) The legal implementation was characterized by a lack of the appropriate application of reference values and coefficient rankings corresponding to the different pay scales. Additional delays lead to the law being partially implemented. Due to the time period under analysis, this study does not include an analysis of the media perception of the relevant issues in the aftermath of the introduction of Executive Order no. 20/2016.(11)

Issues related to fairness and transparency in the healthcare wage law are also negatively portrayed. Moreover, there have been only very few references to the issue of transparency in establishing base salaries.

Financial feasibility emerges as another key factor related to wage increases. In drawing a comparison between the financial and budgetary impact of the wage law and that of the massive exodus of medical staff (through the direct effect on the necessary spending on generating new human resources and through incalculable decrease in the quality of medical services), we must note the necessity of adopting an appropriate remuneration of medical staff that matches the education level and work difficulty levels of the medical personnel.

The imagological analysis is characterized by a high degree of subjectivity. Each indicator and sub-indicator have been processed in a subjective manner and the information in the media articles has been interpreted also according to the vision and personal understanding of the researcher.

CONCLUSIONS

The salaries of healthcare personnel emerge as a topic of high public interest, which requires an appropriate legal framework and a coherent strategy. The problems of the healthcare pay system have led to dysfunctional outcomes in the health system, especially in regards to the migration of health professionals abroad. Currently, the healthcare pay system does not have a unitary character and it lacks a clear base value and clear coefficient rankings for the different wage groups.

Financial feasibility has received the highest amount of press interest, especially given the lack of existing studies on the financial impact of potential modifications of the legal framework regulating public sector employees.

The most notable vulnerability related to the public image of healthcare staff wages emerges from the lack of appropriate legislation to deal with the wages of public sector employees. Such legislation should be closely linked to a coherent human resources strategy to motivate employees. Such a strategy should be developed based on clear studies of financial feasibility and with an eye towards reducing the level of migration abroad.

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