

*By Edik Baghdasaryan**

Anoush Muradyan (the name has been changed to protect the source's identity) is expecting her first child. Her family's joy is tempered, however, with concerns regarding the expenses they will incur for the delivery procedure.

“Once you set foot in a hospital you have to start paying people; from the doctor down to the cleaning attendant,” says 21-year-old Anoush. “They talk about free child delivery but nothing is free when you are pregnant. Periodic testing costs 15,000-20,000 Armenian drams (US\$40-53) and I've been told that the physician alone performing the delivery wants AMD 70,000 (US\$185) up front. Then too, you have to pay the attending nurses for miscellaneous services.”

What does “free” child delivery actually cost?

Over a year has passed since the Armenian Government began to tout the claim that child delivery is free. The media even periodically report that the sector has improved.

The waiting room at the National Center of Perinatology, Obstetrics and Gynecology (PMGHK—Պրինատոլոգիայի, մանկաբարձությունների և գինեկոլոգիայի հանրապետական կանոնադրություն) in Armenia's capital of Yerevan is almost always crowded. On the right as you enter is the office of the Chief Obstetrician/Gynecologist. You will always find expectant mothers milling about the office, in addition to the occasional reporter. I arrived there for an interview an hour early and bided my time in the general waiting room. The walls were affixed with notices regarding the free maternity services offered by the government.

There I met grandma Armik (the name has been changed to protect the source's identity), a 66-year-old woman who pleaded with the waiting room attendant to see her pregnant daughter-in-law. The attendant, seemingly oblivious to the woman's pleas, responded only by pointing to the notices on the wall.

One notice stated: “The hospital administration allows for one free visit to each patient for about one hour between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m.” Another notice next to it stated that patient visits could be made at all hours of the day for a fee of 2,000 AMD (US\$5.30).

Grandma Armik felt compelled to bring her daughter-in-law to Yerevan from the town of Vardenis, 170 kilometers

away, due to recommendations by local doctors, given that the pregnancy had been a difficult one.

Because they had the Medical Care State Certificate, which allows expectant mothers free-of-charge healthcare, they didn't anticipate to be charged any further payments by the hospital administration.

Other notices on the walls listed the “free” maternity services offered by the government to patients who had brought with them the necessary certificates. These services cover the range of necessary child delivery procedures — from medicines and medical equipment and necessary medical and diagnostic testing to medical care by physicians and younger staff members, plus other procedures.

“It's outright banditry and they claim it's all free,” grandma Armik says angrily. “The room costs money and so do the visits; the sanitary attendant must be paid in addition to the nurses and cleaners. I'm on a pension and my son works as a guard receiving the minimum wage (which is 30,000 AMD (US\$78)).”

A young man came through the door leading to the maternity wards and approached the waiting room attendant. He pulled out a 20,000 AMD (US\$52) bill and asked the attendant for change in 1,000 AMD (US\$2.6) notes. Everyone in the waiting room knew he needed the change to pay off the nurses inside to “take good care” of his wife.

As I listened to grandma Armik's complaints, the attendant gave permission to two individuals to visit a patient at the same time. This was in violation of a notice on the wall that prohibited more than one visitor at a time. On top of the 4,000 AMD (US\$10) that was required for a two-person visit, the individuals placed an extra 1,000 AMD (US\$2.5) on the attendant's table. The amount was sufficient for the attendant to disregard enforcement of the notice.

Anoush's experience

Anoush Muradyan was registered as an expectant mom at the Research Center for Mother and Child Healthcare (MMAPGK—Մոր եւ մանկան առողջությնն պահպանման գիտահետազոտական կենտրոն) in Yerevan.

Anoush says, “Right off the bat I paid 60,000 AMD (US\$160) for various tests and analyses. During my first visit, one of the nurses who was taking me to the analysis

room pulled me aside and directly told me, 'Dear girl, you're new here and probably don't know it but you have to pay me 1,000 AMD (US\$2.6) as well.' You have to pay the nurse for escorting you and the nurse for taking your blood. But none of these payments are registered. The cash quietly goes straight into their pocket."

When these charges are added up, Anoush has up to now paid about 200,000 AMD (US\$530) to the hospital staff to receive their "free" services during her pregnancy. She expects to pay at minimum another 150,000 AMD (US\$398) for the actual delivery of her child.

As of July 1, 2008, the State Certificate Program to Assist Childbirths was established in Armenia. This certificate officially states that medical care and services associated with pregnancy and child delivery are to be conducted free of charge.

When the certificate program was launched, the Health Minister, Harutyun Koushkyan, asserted that all maternity-related issues would be addressed and resolved at the highest level. He was stating his conviction that birthrates would rise concurrently with the country's development and improvements in Armenia's quality of life. According to Minister Koushkyan, certificates would not only spur rising birthrates but also assist the anti-corruption campaign that is being waged in the health field.

"The inclusion of certificates was a revolutionary step for our country. Truly, our expectant mothers receive no-charge care. That is, the medical institution is paid by the government. But it is regarded as free service for our citizens," says Razmik Abrahamyan, chief obstetrician with the Ministry of Health, who has headed the PMGHK for the past 20 years.

However, the concept of "free service" does not correspond to reality in this case. Even if we calculate the minimum costs for an expectant mother at an average, non-specialized medical center, without undue complications and additional visits, patients will still incur costs of 120,000-150,000 AMD (US\$318-397) for necessary maternity medical care and oversight.

"Supplemental Revenue" for healthcare employees

Ministry of Health Press Spokesperson, Rouslana Gevorgyan, states that minister Koushkyan personally pays close attention to the "State Certificate Program to Assist Childbirths."

The Health Ministry also claims that the huge amount of work that has been done in regard to public information and monitoring has produced significant results. When the certificate program was first launched, complaints concerning non-official maternity costs amounted to 48 percent of the total complaints received by the ministry. Three months later, these complaints dropped to eight percent; five months later the number dropped to zero, according to the ministry.

The inclusion of the certificate program also encouraged directors of maternity wards to create favorable conditions. The more deliveries a medical institution performs, the more bonuses it receives and the better conditions it can offer to attract more patients.

Nurse Mariam Hakobyan complains that physicians receive hefty bonuses while the bonus amounts for mid-level employees like her are a mere pittance. Thus, their only alternative is to devise sources of “additional revenue.” On paper at least, the Ministry states that the wage regulations for maternity sector employees are the same for all; however, the actual wages depend on the number of child births and the number of employees in each hospital.

The certificate program allows the pregnant patient to choose her doctor. The patient is therefore permitted to summon a physician who works at another hospital. The government has set a bonus of 6,000-8,000 AMD (US\$16-21) to be paid to outside physician referrals.

“Even relatives of the expectant mother realize that the doctor is looking to pocket more than 8,000 AMD (US\$21) for responding to the call,” says one of the physicians at the MMAPGK.

Razmik Abrahamyan, chief obstetrician-gynecologist of the Ministry of Healthcare, claims that “supplemental revenues” is a characteristic way for Armenians to express their thanks for a job well done.

“Back in the Soviet era, people would make a present of flowers, a bottle of cognac or cash,” Mr. Abrahamyan argues. “The custom has been passed down. Certain doctors would create such a situation where the pregnant woman or her relatives would certainly have to respond in kind to the medical staff. It is something that cannot be corrected overnight. Corruption, however, is another matter entirely and has no connection with receiving revenue on the side”, he says.

According to Transparency International (TI), corruption is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.

TI's 2009 Global Corruption Barometer (based on public opinion polls) shows that 43 percent of survey respondents in Armenia have paid bribes during the past year, and that nine percent of all respondents paid bribes when they made use of the health sector. No specific studies examining corruption levels in the health sector have been conducted from July 2008 to the present.

Because of this, there is no public or private agency that can competently gauge either the increase or decrease in corruption levels that have taken place in the country during the past two years.

Numerous oversight agencies have been created and various anti-corruption projects have been launched by local and international organizations. Despite these efforts, the average Armenian citizen encounters corruption in all its diverse forms at every turn in their daily lives.

Contrary to the government's claims that its health sector reform package has taken root and produced results in the fight against corruption, the Armenian public has yet to experience the full impact of these reforms.

**Edik Baghdasaryan is the founder and head of the organization Investigative Journalists of Armenia and editor in-chief of the newspaper "Hetq." He received the Global Shining Light Award in 2008, and the US Embassy in Armenia presented him with the Armenian Freedom Defender Award in 2009.*