

Zita Mamajanova, 59, did not know her rights when she went to a regional clinic. She sought the free medical services that she had been told she could receive there, but could not get the information she needed from the staff. This is a common problem in Georgia: uninformed patients — even pregnant women whose children's lives may depend on care — are forced to pay for services to which they are entitled for free.

Five years ago, the United Nations adopted Millennium Development Goals, intended to improve conditions in developing countries around the world by 2015. Georgia was one of 191 nations who signed the declaration. One of the primary goals is decreasing maternal and infant deaths, but according to a 2004 World Bank report, Georgia is not likely to reach the goal by 2015, unless it undergoes major changes. The report shows that the current death rate among infants is five deaths per 1,000 births.

A survey on women's reproductive health found several problem areas in this regard: poverty, inadequate primary care and uneducated mothers. Zaza Sinauridze, chief obstetrician of the prenatal department at Ghudushauri Clinic, says prenatal care in Georgia is moving in the right direction with help from donor organizations, as evidenced by decreasing maternal and infant mortality, but many gaps remain. The major problem of uneducated patients is of concern to both doctors and patients, with some unscrupulous doctors extorting money from mothers-to-be by charging for services that by rights should be free.

Another abuse of state medical programs was perpetrated by staff of the United Social State Insurance Fund (SUSIF), according to authorities who were still investigating the case in late 2007. The scheme involved gynecologists placing women who were seven to eight months pregnant in positions in private businesses under a state program. The women signed documents granting them token salaries, but the businesses registered them with the government with much higher salaries. When the women gave birth and went on maternity leave, the companies pocketed the inflated amounts. Financial Police say the companies cleared 570,000 lari (US\$343,146) in the scheme.

In October 2006, seven SUSIF staff members were arrested and charged with exceeding duties and receiving bribes, and SUSIF chairman Zaza Sopromadze was

arrested and charged with exceeding his duties. A doctor also was arrested.

According to State Statistics Department, 15 percent of Georgia's population is well-to-do, 35 percent is middle class, 40 percent is poor (but not under the poverty line) and 10 percent lives in poverty. The government tries to fight corruption, but it is not surprising that it persists and has been a fact of life for a long time, hitting a financially vulnerable population. The average salary is 115 lari (US\$69), and a pension is 38 lari (US\$23). This minimal income must cover increasing costs: public transportation has doubled to 40 tetri (100 tetri equal 1 lari), bread costs 50 tetri, electro energy 0.13 to 0.17 tetri and a cubic meter of gas 0.50 tetri. For the average Georgian, minimal monthly expenses are nearly 10 lari (US\$6) in summer, while in winter they are 10 times more. Under such financial pressures, it is no surprise that corruption persists as a desperate population tries to strike a deal with collectors. The problem is that most do not know their rights.

To address this, the government developed the Georgian National Anticorruption Strategy Implementation Plan. Adopted in 2005, the plan requires periodic reports to the president. The 2006 report says that in the presence of measures designed to cut corruption in taxation and licensing, the number of corruption deals has decreased.

A new mechanism for controlling high level corruption has been created by reorganizing the General Prosecutor Investigative Department and other units. A Constitutional Security Department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs also handles corruption-related crimes.

Such initiatives are having an effect, at least by one objective measure. In 2006, Georgia weighed in with a 2.8 score on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index survey. That placed Georgia No. 99 out of 136 countries surveyed. It was an improvement from No. 130 in 2005 and No. 133 in 2004, the result of steps taken after the 2003 Rose Revolution.

In 2007, the Economist Intelligence Unit, a British organization that is part of The Economist Group, published a report about different countries' economic and political situations. According to the report, Georgia has taken measures against smuggling and tax fraud, and corruption has decreased in public spheres such as police, taxation, health and education. The report was based on the barometer of the Institute of Policy Studies for the Georgian Opinion.

Also in 2007, the International Republican Institute, in cooperation with the U.S. Agency for International Development, conducted a survey to find out the “general mood” of Georgians. When asked whether in the previous 12 months they had been put in a situation in which they had to pay a bribe, an encouraging 95 percent of respondents said no.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that during 10 months in 2006, 159 corruption felonies were registered and only 154 of those criminals were released. According to State Statistics Department data, which is based on Internal Affairs numbers, there were 11 cases of abuse of power.

