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Date :	May 2010	Document	F10-079 EN
Title / Titre:	Health workforce in Portugal : Portuguese doctors to be exempt from public posts freeze		
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BMJ 2010; 340:c2788 doi: 10.1136/bmj.c2788 (Published 24 May 2010)

Cite this as: BMJ 2010; 340:c2788

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Portuguese doctors to be exempt from public posts freeze but services at risk

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Doctors working in Portugal's health service are likely to be spared the recently announced austerity measures that include freezing all new civil service appointments.

The Portuguese Ministry of Finances announced it would freeze all new public administration appointments starting on 1 July, including the admission of doctors into the national healthcare system, as part of a newly announced package of austerity measures required for accelerating the decrease in the country's budget deficit, which is one of the largest in the Euro Zone (9.4% in 2009).

The Ministry of Health said last week that doctors would be the exception and their appointments would not be halted.

Manuel Pizarro, Secretary of State of Health, said, "We will hire all doctors that are necessary to provide the best possible health care to the Portuguese people."

Portugal's austerity measures, which initially did not include stopping the appointment of new healthcare professionals and other civil servants, were reviewed after the extraordinary meeting of economy and finance ministers in Brussels, on 9 May. Ministers decided to accelerate the drop in the budget deficit of Portugal and Spain.

The Portuguese Medical Association, unions, and hospital administration boards have already expressed concerns that the prospect of not being able to hire doctors, and eventual cuts on overtime pay and outsourced doctors, will jeopardise the regular functioning of the National Health Service. Emergency departments are especially at risk as they rely heavily on staff working overtime and locum agencies to fill rotas.

The austerity measures also threaten to leave about 1 million Portuguese citizens without a GP because many doctors have requested early retirement this year, most of them community doctors.

Pedro Nunes, President of the Portuguese Medical Association, said, "There is currently a serious shortage of doctors, and many doctors are leaving the National Health Service. Without resources, we only have one of two solutions: either we close down healthcare services, or the quality criteria will have to drop. If the Portuguese Medical Association would take into account the quality criteria in emergency departments, which are not met anymore, I don't know where we would end up."

Concerns were also raised that recently qualified doctors would be prevented from pursuing postgraduate training because specialist training in Portugal is carried out in public hospitals and primary healthcare centres.

Inês Rosendo, President of the Portuguese Council of Junior Doctors of the Portuguese Medical Association, told the BMJ, "It would be a great scandal if recently qualified doctors are barred from entering the NHS and subsequently, specialist training. Portuguese doctors must work for two years in the NHS before gaining full registration. If they're not admitted, they can't work as doctors since they don't have clinical autonomy and must either leave the country or find another job."

Constantino Sakellarides, head of the National School of Public Health, said, "We're currently going through a crisis that requires control of expenses, but I hope the government is intelligent concerning this issue, and understands that it is possible to contain expense in many ways, but that the containment of expenses should not apply to human resources in health care. If it does, it will jeopardise not only the ongoing reform of primary health care, but also the existence of the National Health Service itself."