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## **Czech doctors win wage increases after three year campaign**

Hospital doctors in the Czech Republic have agreed to a wage settlement after a long and bitter battle in which nearly a quarter of the country's 16 000 doctors threatened to quit and leave the country unless they received pay rises.

The settlement was approved by the government on 23 February, after which doctors who had tendered resignations which were due to be effective from 1 March withdrew them. Under the settlement doctors' pay will rise by around a third in March, according to Claude Wetzel, president of the European Federation of Salaried Doctors, which has supported the Czech doctors.

The pay increase will work out to between 5 000 and 8 000 crowns (£175-£280; €206-€330; \$285-\$465) a month. Doctors currently earn on average of about 48 000 crowns per month, including overtime, compared with the national average for all workers around 24 000.

Dr Wetzel, who has been "deeply involved" in the Czech dispute, which has been running since 2008, said doctors will receive an additional 10% rise on 1 January 2012.

"I am satisfied with the agreement because the Czech doctors are satisfied," said Dr Wetzel. The only European doctors with lower average wages are those in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, he added. Since the 1990s some 8 000 doctors have left the Czech Republic, with about half going to the US or Australia, and the other half to other EU countries, most to neighbouring Germany followed by the UK. The settlement calls for salaries of younger doctors, now as low as 17 000 to 18 000 crowns per month, to be set at levels at least one and a half times the national average of all workers by 2013. Monthly wages for more experienced and specialised doctors will rise incrementally, topping out at three times the national average.

Dr Wetzel, an anaesthesiologist and intensive care specialist at Hôpitaux Universitaires in Strasbourg, France, said the agreed wages for Czech doctors are standard in western European countries.

In spring last year the Czech Doctors' Trade Union (LOK-SCL), with the backing of the Czech Medical Chamber, warned the government that unless wage demands were met, a large portion of hospital doctors would quit at the end of the year and go abroad. The doctors dubbed the campaign, "Thank You, We Are Leaving".

With the Czech government trying to reduce the national budget deficit, the Health Ministry had not budged by the end of 2010 and the resignation deadline was extended to 1 March. The dispute

became increasingly bitter in recent months with Prime Minister Petr Nečas threatening to use four military hospitals for the general population if doctors resigned on 1 March.

One member of parliament called on prosecutors to view any disruption to healthcare service by the "Thank You, We Are Leaving" campaign as a criminal act. The Prague state attorney's office announced, however, that in the event of a stoppage neither doctors nor the union would have committed a crime.

Dr Wetzel said it was difficult for Czech doctors to threaten mass resignations, but added: "We tried all we could for three years. In such a situation, it was the only solution."

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