



ESPN – Flash report

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Payment of health user charges for children in Portugal

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Theme:	<i>Healthcare</i>
Title:	Payment of health user charges for children in Portugal
Category:	<i>Policy measure</i>
Abstract:	The Portuguese Government recently approved the extension of the exemption of payment of health user charges to all children, i.e. up to the age of 18. This extension, effective since June 2015, is expected to reach approximately half a million children aged 13 to 17. It supposedly will facilitate the access of children to healthcare, thereby lowering health costs for households with children.
Description:	<p>Until May 2015, the exemption of children from payment of health user charges was limited to children aged up to 12. Decree-Law 61/2015, of 22 April 2015, exempts all children and young adults until 18 years old from the payment of user charges. According to data from Statistics Portugal for 2014, the exemption will cover approximately half a million children (51.1% boys and 48.9% girls) in addition to the 1.2 million previously covered. User charges are set at €5 for a consultation with a general practitioner in a health centre and at €20.6 for an emergency consultation at the hospital.</p> <p>The measure did not give rise to any major controversy and it is not expected that it will bring significant negative consequences.</p> <p>This change is directly linked to an obligation in the National Programme for the Health of Children and Young People, aimed at promoting health and lifelong primary healthcare. The document, dated June 2013, establishes the obligation for children to attend a medical consultation at the age of 12 or 13 and from the age of 15 up to the age of 18, for preventive reasons.</p> <p>The Government believes the measure may act as an indirect stimulus to an increase in the birth rate and also, which is obviously of crucial importance, as a way of promoting healthcare by eliminating the financial constraints in access to the national healthcare system.</p> <p>The measure should counteract, at least for children, one of the major direct impacts of the economic and financial crisis on access to healthcare: the increase of user charges and the possible resulting negative effects in terms of demand for healthcare.</p>
Outlook & Commentary:	<p>The decision to extend the exemption of children from payment of health user charges is important from a social policy and social inclusion perspective. Guaranteeing the access of all children to the health system free of charge, moreover in a context of crisis, seems to be a good way of promoting their access to healthcare and ensuring the full commitment of children's families to this important objective.</p> <p>This change partially countered criticisms made at the end of 2011, when the new rules regarding the conditions for exemption were implemented: the Movement of Healthcare Users and the Portuguese Association of Large</p>

	<p>Families considered the rules to be unfair because they did not take the number of children into account, but rather only the number of taxable persons.</p> <p>The improved access of children to healthcare resulting from this positive development could be reinforced by a more integrated approach towards the promotion of children's health which could include, for instance, a stronger network of paediatric primary care, early intervention programmes, and guaranteeing that all children have a family doctor from birth.</p> <p>Moreover, the Government's intention to indirectly stimulate the birth rate through this measure may fall short. The Commission for a Birth Rate Policy recently defended the adoption of an integrated policy for the promotion of birth rate as well as the removal of existing obstacles to birth rate rather than the simple provision of benefits.</p>
<p>Further reading:</p>	<p>Decree-Law 61/2015 of April 22- Diário da República No 78/2015, Série I de 2015-04-22, available at: https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/67051306.</p> <p>Augusto, G.F. (2012). <i>Cuts in Portugal's NHS could compromise care</i>. Lancet; 379:400.</p> <p>Azevedo, J. (coord.) (2014). <i>Por um Portugal amigo das crianças, das famílias e da natalidade (2015-2035)</i>., available at: http://www.psd.pt/ficheiros/dossiers_politicos/dossier1405440683.pdf.</p> <p>Barros, P.P. (2012). <i>Health policy reform in tough times: the case of Portugal</i>. Health Policy. Jun; 106(1):17-22. doi: 10.1016/j.healthpol.2012.04.008. Epub 2012 May 7.</p> <p>Barros, P.P., et al. (2013). <i>Impacto das taxas moderadoras na utilização de serviços de saúde</i>. Lisbon, Nova School of Business and Economics, available at: www.acss.min-saude.pt/Portals/0/impacto-taxas-moderadoras-v3.pdf (accessed 5 November 2014).</p> <p>Lopes, Manuel et al (coord.) (2015) <i>Acesso aos cuidados de saúde. Um direito em risco? Relatório de Primavera 2015</i>, OPSS, available at: http://www.saude-portugal.pt/download.php?id=974&type=news.</p>
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