

Portugal: Improving the access of migrants and refugees to healthcare during the pandemic

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PEDRO PERISTA – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

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In May 2020, the Portuguese health authorities issued a document (Information 10/2020) explaining how they will improve access of migrants and refugees to healthcare. This comes as a specific response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It adds to previously existing legislation and guidelines aimed at facilitating this population's access, which have proven insufficient.

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Description

In May 2020, the Portuguese health authorities issued a document (Information 10/2020) outlining their plan to increase access of migrants and refugees to healthcare.

The document states that due to concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, special care should be taken regarding specific vulnerable populations, including the migrant and refugee population. It sets out that all migrants/refugees, regardless of their formal status in Portugal and/or documentation situation, are entitled to healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidelines included in the document aim to avoid the need for migrants and refugees to go in person to the competent services in order to legitimise their presence in Portugal. They state that access to the Portuguese national health system (SNS) should be granted to every migrant/refugee who is able to present a document, issued by the online Immigration and Borders Service, proving that a request or expression of interest has been made to be allowed to stay in Portugal. Such a document is also enough for registering with the SNS.

The guidelines may more easily be respected due to decree-law 20/2020, of 1 May, which establishes that all documents and visas authorising the presence in Portuguese territory which

have expired as from 24 February, should be accepted without reservations till 30 June 2020, and also after that date if the holder is able to prove at least that their renewal is in the pipeline.



Outlook and commentary

The measure is important to ensure access of migrants and refugees to healthcare. It is crucial in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially since, as emphasised by the health services, lockdown, self-isolation and/or social distancing are particularly difficult for those living in precarious housing situations.

It follows appeals from parties currently in the opposition, in particular from the centre-right Social Democrat Party (PSD), which considered that the situation of the most vulnerable migrants and refugees was not being properly managed, especially for those living in more precarious housing situations such as hostels and collective accommodation provided by employers. Several outbreaks of COVID-19 have occurred among migrants/refugees living in these housing contexts.

Formally, even undocumented immigrants have access to healthcare. The Ministry of Health Dispatch 25360/2001 of 12 December 2001 – to which Information 20/2020 refers – states that undocumented immigrants have access to health services as long as they are able to present a document, issued by the junta de freguesia (parish

council), proving that they have resided in Portugal for more than 90 days.

Additionally, in 2014, the Ministry of Health published a welcome manual for foreign citizens, dealing with access to the Portuguese health system. The manual describes the procedures for foreign nationals to register with the system, including third-country nationals not legally in the country.

However, both national and international studies have shown that access of foreign nationals to the SNS is often restricted to usage of emergency services. The World Health Organisation noted that the complexity of administrative procedures and the possibility of having to pay for services limit

access for many irregular migrants (WHO, 2014). The study by the Portuguese Health Regulation Authority (Entidade Reguladora da Saúde, ERS) identified barriers to the access of foreign nationals to the SNS. These included constraints regarding the procedures, especially for undocumented migrants. Since these do not have a SNS user number, IT systems often do not allow referrals to specialist care or the prescription of medicines and ancillary diagnostic and therapeutic means.

The new regulation is therefore very welcome and it is hoped that it will have the expected results.

Further reading

Direção-Geral da Saúde (2020), Informação nº 010/2020 - COVID-19: Fase de Mitigação - Migrantes e Refugiados.

Available at:

<https://www.dgs.pt/normas-orientacoes-e-informacoes/informacoes/informacao-n-0102020-de-08052020-pdf.aspx>.

ERS - Entidade Reguladora da Saúde (2015), Acesso a cuidados de saúde por imigrantes, Lisboa: ERS.

Available at:

[https://www.ers.pt/uploads/writer_file/document/1480/Estudo_ERS - Acesso a Cuidados de Saude por Imigrantes v2 .pdf](https://www.ers.pt/uploads/writer_file/document/1480/Estudo_ERS_-_Acesso_a_Cuidados_de_Saude_por_Imigrantes_v2_.pdf).

WHO – World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (2014), Portugal: Assessing Health-system Capacity to Manage Sudden Large Influxes of Migrants, World Health Organization: Copenhagen. Available at: http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/265012/Portugal-assessing-health-system-capacity-to-manage-sudden-large-influxes-of-migrants.pdf.

Author

[Pedro Perista](#) (CESIS – Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social (Centre for Studies for Social Intervention))

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