

THE REPORT FROM THE *SIXTY-THIRD INTERNATIONAL ATLANTIC ECONOMIC SOCIETY CONFERENCE HELD IN MADRID, SPAIN, MARCH 14–18, 2007*

Health and health care are important areas for an economic analysis. It was documented by the fact that many papers presented at the „Sixty-Third International Atlantic Economic Conference“ were addressing the economics, or policy issues of the health care. „The International Atlantic Economic Society“ (IAES) is a prominent organization of economists reaching out across continents. The society credentials include a list of Nobel Prize winners in economics who were and still are active members of the IAES. The conference brought together 400 academic and practicing economists and social scientists from 40 countries this year. They delivered around 300 papers in 70 thematic sections. Almost all countries from „Old and New Europe“ were represented with the noticeable absence of participants from Russia. As always, a large contingent of participants from USA was in at the conference. Countries representing new market economies were also well represented. Especially Poland fielded a strong group of economists and social scientists. The Czech Republic was also well represented. The Czech Republic had its own section devoted to social and economic aspects of the Czech Republic integration to the European Union. The section was organized and chaired by Dr. O. Dittrich from the Economic Faculty of the Czech Agricultural University. Two papers dealing with health care issues were presented in this section: „Medical Migration in the Czech Republic“ (Hnilicová, Vavrečková, Dobiášová) and „Determinants of Health Among Homeless Population in the Czech Republic“ (Dittrich, Háva).

In general, papers dealing with health care issues were well represented and covered the wide range of topics. Among topics discussed were for example social and health problems endemic to cultural change and economic development in wealthy countries. It appears that even very rich countries such as Luxemburg and Sweden are facing dramatic increases in the frequency of social exclusion and extreme poverty. This trend has negative influence on social structure and health of the population in those countries. Few papers discussed the fact that the increase in the global migration makes the question of access to health care services for migrant an important area, which needs to be addressed. Migrants are usually more exposed to economic and social devastation, which unexpected health problem such as a birth of handicapped child can bring on the migrant families.

Very interesting was also a paper on the health and economic impact of the increase in the population's obesity in the USA. Number of papers focused on analysis of health care systems and delivery of health care services in different countries with a special attention paid to the situation in the USA.

Economists discussed a critical situation in health care insurance industry and the impact it has on the quality of life of Americans. Number of people without health care insurance, or insufficient insurance coverage in USA is continuously increasing. New phenomenon is the rapidly increasing numbers of middle class Americans without the health care coverage. Since they are

not legally obliged to do so, many employers stopped offering, or curtailed their participation in the health care coverage for their employees. Some participants expressed a view that this trend will continue and lead to demise of employer based insurance coverage altogether. US companies point out to the loss of their competitiveness in the global marketplace due to the high cost of the health care insurance for their employees. Due to the high cost, many Americans don't buy health care insurance at all, or buy insufficient coverage. The result is the high number of uninsured or underinsured people in all age categories.

Some discussants also pointed out other mounting problems in the US health care insurance market. It is becoming apparent that insurance companies spend a considerable amount of collected premiums to devise ways how to avoid, or to delay medical bills reimbursement to patients and providers for services rendered. Therefore, resources which otherwise could have been used to pay for medical care are instead wasted in a zero-sum struggle over who ends up with the bill. It is in the direct contrast with public declarations by insurance companies that their goal is to purchase in the market place the most effective health care for their insureds. The general consensus among participants was that market oriented US health care system is failing to ensure an access to health care services to US citizens at a reasonable cost.

The current discussion in the Czech Republic about the future of the health care and the role of insurance companies should play in it could benefit from materials presented at the conference. It is pity that no member of the health care reform team working at the Czech Ministry of Health attended the conference. May be next time?

The growing phenomenon of medical tourism was the subject of the paper presented by American economist and sociologist, Mrs. Milica Bookman. The medical tourism describes the migration of patients from developed countries to less developed countries in the search of medical treatments. Patients travel to take advantage of lower prices, shorter waiting times, or gain access to some treatments not offered in their countries. Endoprosthetics, cardio surgery (clients are usually well off retirees), complex examination and diagnostics and recondition anti stress and weight loss programs are medical services in high demand. It is recognized that tourism is the important source of economic growth in many countries. The export of health care services can complement the development of the traditional tourist industry and enhance the growth potential of destination countries. Most health care tourists come from USA, UK, Germany, Spain and Belgium. Most frequent destinations of health care tourists are Costa Rica, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. Mrs. Bookman thought that Central and East Europe could be the next wave in terms of being destination countries for medical tourisms.

The paper of authors Dittrich and Háva used statistical analysis to evaluate various factors in terms of their influence on health

status of homeless people. Preliminary results seem to indicate that the experience of homeless people with the institutional framework and their access to health care services are important determinants of their health status.

For example, homeless people who experienced sometimes during the period of homelessness the denial of health care service were in the significantly worse health, than those without such experience. We can speculate that the perceived injustice of the society toward homeless as seen from the point of view of homeless person is exemplified in the refusal of the adequate health care. After a bad experience with the system many homeless people may simply stop trying to interact with institutions and people representing the health care system. They “drop out” and their situation including the health status deteriorates.

Paper authored by Hniličová, Vavrečková and Dobiášová presented some results of the research about the potential migration of Czech medical doctors abroad. The issue of the “Brain drain” meaning the migration of professionals from poorer countries to richer countries is a global issue with a potentially serious economic impact especially on “sending” countries. Our research indicates that the migration of Czech physicians abroad could become a problem in the forthcoming years. In that respect, some session participants suggested that the Czech government should get involved in financing the international exchange programs for physicians especially in those specialties most at risk. As a result, the rates of migration could be influenced by setting a set of rules under which the financing of physician’s stay abroad would be available.

It was only fitting that at the conference taking place in a major European city of the EU member country, many papers dealt with the problems and issues concerning economy of the EU. The accession of new countries to EU and the stability and integrity of the common European currency in the long run were two major categories concerning the EU economy which dominated the discussion.

These topics were also subject of the keynote speech delivered by Mr. Jean Pisani – Ferry, the economic adviser to the government of France and the Director of the Brussels European Global Economic Laboratory. He presented compelling arguments pointing out dangers for the common European currency over the next few years. Dr. Ferry pointed out that countries of EU are experiencing very different social and economic problems, which may require application of different monetary and fiscal policies, but they can’t be pursued by them under the current EU rules. It can be expected that tensions stemming from different social and economic interest of member states will increase over the next few years. The final impact of the divergence of national interests on EU and its currency is currently difficult to estimate.

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