

4. A Vision of Health for Slovakia

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

Health is generally perceived as the essential value of human development and human life. The health status of an individual is formed by factors of social, economic, and general environment. The health determinants discussed in the previous chapters allow for a better understanding of the current condition and also for a brief outline of further development of public health in Slovakia.

The development of the health condition of Slovakia's population over the last 50 years has been affected by dramatic historical events that resulted in sudden changes of economic, demographic, and psychosocial factors. The long-lasting totalitarian system created a specific situation in which risk factors came to the foreground that were not prevalent in democratic societies. The unfavorable effects on the health of the population has been the result of a number of psycho-social factors, such as chronic stress, mental tensions, frustration, depression, hopelessness, and apathy that induce the emergence of cardiovascular and neoplastic diseases and further weaken the performance of the immune system. An important role in increasing cardiovascular and oncological mortality may stem from oxidation stress due to overproduction of free oxygen radicals in the population that lived in a degraded working and general environment, with high consumption of cigarettes and distilled spirits, and low intake of substances with antioxidant activity from a diet deficient in fruits and vegetables.

Political turbulence has been unusually intensive since the political changes of 1989. The less educated portion of Slovakia's society has more problems adjusting to the conditions of a market economy. Because of emergence of new phenomena such as high unemployment rates, income inequality and political instability, the number of frustrated, hopeless, and hostile individuals in Slovakia have grown. Educated and democratically oriented citizens have better preconditions to understand opportunities to influence their health condition by their own actions. On the other hand, poorly educated citizens succumb more easily to the pressure of totalitarian power and become passive even with respect to their own health.

The situation in education is contradictory. The number of university students is increasing, which should be considered positive from the viewpoint of health; however, there is also a marked growth of those who finish their studies after having completed elementary school. Education on one's own health, including healthy nutrition, exercise, refusal of smoking, alcoholism, drugs, coping with stress, etc., is not sufficiently incorporated into the curricula of schools.

A high number of individuals with elementary education are also of concern due to unemployment rates. It is generally acknowledged that most unemployed are among individuals with only elementary education. The negative impact of unemployment upon health is apparent; Slovakia's top position in unemployment ranking of transition countries can certainly not be regarded as satisfactory from the viewpoint of employment or health impact. Inevitable restrictive measures in the economy will affect the purchasing power of the population; hence, in terms of socio-economic determinants, no excess of positive impulses should be expected.

The level of education and training co-determines lifestyle patterns. International comparisons reveal relatively high consumption of concentrated alcoholic beverages and cigarettes in Slovakia, notably among individuals with lower levels of education. Changes in the price structure of foods improved the structure of the population's diet, with the exception of a drop in milk consumption; consumption of butter has dropped and consumption of vegetable oils with high vitamin E contents, of vegetables, fruits and mainly southern fruits have increased.

The environment, considered as the most negatively impacting health determinant in the early 1990s, is gradually becoming one of the determinants showing a positive trend. The availability of safe drinking water and the quality of air keeps increasing. The most important problem concerns insufficient proportions of wastewater treatment and growing levels of noise due to traffic. Indicators of the working environment are mostly positive. It is difficult to estimate to what extent this may be due to high unemployment rates and the disappearance of several, high-risk workplaces.

The demographic determinants are dominated by rapidly decreasing natural increments, moderately growing life expectancy, and gradual population aging. It is highly probable that such development will imply higher health care costs.

The Slovak health care system is in a crisis that has several dimensions (financing, quality, management, human resources). The system cumulates debt and financial injections using privatization revenues, which is not the solution to its financial problems. The generated debt and its monthly growing

value could result in the collapse of the whole system; the patient does not play a substantial role in the system. The system is a burden because it provides unbearable financial protection to participants of the system. This applies to health insurance funds, state-owned inpatient facilities, and patients. However, money for such financial protection is not available.

The fully reinsured patient does not even receive services, for which funds are available, because such funds are allocated in an inefficient way. The extensive Rules of Medical Procedures and missing financial participation by the patient often result in abuse of the system by patients and health care providers. Although there is an excess of supply, demand is still growing, which is an economic paradox. The existing arrangement nurtures daily mass-scale corruption as well as very dangerous "sophisticated corruption," which involves relatively few people.

Preventive influence has a low share, although prevention represents the most efficient investment into health in economical terms. Health is perceived as a key component of life, however, people's approach to their own health does not always respond to this fact.

Improvements in the health condition of the population will not only be dependent on positive changes in the organization of health care provision, but also on the overall development of the society, which shall give citizens the hope of gradual improvement of their social and economic situation.