

## **Undocumented children and the access to healthcare at the hospital**

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In the Netherlands remain between 100.000 and 150.000 undocumented migrants. According to estimates approximately 30.000 of them are children. Research points out that those children are more vulnerable for risks at their well being and that they show more mental problems.

According to the Dutch Aliens Act, undocumented people have the right to (medical necessary) healthcare, to education for children until 18 year as well as the right for juridical assistance.

From research is known that undocumented migrants, but also health professionals in hospitals, know very little about the Aliens Act and the international rights of children.

In 2008/2009 Pharos, Unicef Netherlands and Defence for Children International (section Netherlands) conducted research into the access to healthcare at the hospital for undocumented children. The purpose of the research was finding out what the sticking points are when trying to get access to healthcare at the hospital and if their access changed due to the introduction of the new regulation.

Until 2009 the healthcare at the hospital in the Netherlands was not financed by an official administration. Hospitals had to make agreements with the health insurances in order to make them pay for (Dutch) people who were not insured and/or didn't pay their bills. In 2009, a new regulation is introduced. An official administration pays hospitals (whom they have contracted) a certain amount for the treatment of an undocumented migrant.

### **Literature search**

Dutch literature searches reveal that little research has been done into undocumented children in hospitals. It also learns that undocumented migrants are in general scared to go to a hospital. They think the police will wait for them at the hospital. They are also fear the high amount of money they suspect have to pay afterwards - since undocumented parents and professionals of the hospital are often unaware of the right of undocumented children to get medical help, irrespective the fact they can pay the bill or not. Sometimes undocumented parents and their children are refused at the hospital intake counter because they can't pay beforehand nor show some identification. In some cases the counter clerk refuses to contact a doctor to assess whether it concerns a medical urgency or not. In fact, emergency aid should be given always.

Also the literature search showed that the right to healthcare for undocumented migrants is embedded in several (inter)national laws and treaties but that the knowledge of these treaties in actual practice at hospitals is very little.

### **Method of research**

Twenty-three undocumented children between four and twenty-one year old were interviewed at two times; in 2008 and in 2009 because of the introduction of the new regulation. We talked to the mothers of the (very) young children (under 12 years).

Fifty hospitals all over the Netherlands were invited to participate in the research. Thirteen hospitals reacted. Eight of them are located in four big cities (Amsterdam, Den Haag, Rotterdam and Utrecht). The other hospitals were at the other parts of the country. At the hospitals we interviewed 49 professionals. Among them are medical doctors at the emergency room, social workers, financial staff members and counter clerks. The professionals were also interviewed twice; in 2008 and in 2009 after the introduction of the new regulation.

During the interviews we informed the professionals informally about the rights and duties of undocumented migrants. We also submitted an informal protocol to be discussed, a 'what-to-do with undocumented migrants' document which was available at the intake counter of one of the hospitals.

### **Results**

Our research shows undocumented children and their parents are not familiar with their rights related to healthcare, nor their duties (they have to pay for care given). At both times (2008 and 2009) the undocumented children and their parents declared to be afraid of the police. They are afraid the professionals at the hospital will inform the police they are there. Which is why parents wait long time before they go to the hospital with their sick child.

Undocumented parents do want to pay for healthcare, but since healthcare is expensive they are often unable to pay the bill. In 2008, some of the parents were faced with difficulties at the counter of the hospital. Counter clerks forced them to pay first. When they couldn't they were sent away. At the second interview, in 2009, it appeared the parents were sent to the (health insurance) contracted hospitals by the official administration.

When the children got treatment at the hospital, they received the same (level of) care as other people.

Until 2009 the professionals in the thirteen hospitals all gave emergency help. Medical aid, which could be postponed, had to be paid first by the undocumented migrants. If that was not possible, they were sent away by the counter clerk. One hospital developed a protocol on how to deal with undocumented migrants. According to the counter clerks the fact some undocumented migrants don't know they have to pay for healthcare, pose a major problem. Some of the undocumented migrants seem to think healthcare is a human right that should not be paid for if one is unable to do so. Most professionals were not informed about the rights of undocumented children. Medical doctors often didn't know they have to help children at all circumstances, even if their parents can't pay the bill. Two doctors (out of thirteen) only provided care to undocumented children after their parents paid. However all doctors gave emergency healthcare.

After the introduction of the new regulation (2009) the access to the hospital has improved according to the professionals. Emergency help generally poses no problem but care, which can be postponed, has to be referred to a contracted hospital. According to counter clerks many undocumented migrants still don't know their rights and duties. Some of the undocumented migrants got angry when they heard they had to pay. They heard about the new regulation and thought healthcare was for free now. All counter clerks had a protocol on how to deal with undocumented migrants. The health professionals all knew about the rights of undocumented children. Doctors all provided care in all cases or they referred the patients to contracted hospitals.

## Conclusions

- Undocumented children and their parents are not well informed about their rights and duties concerning access to healthcare in hospitals.
- Regardless the 2009 regulation undocumented children and their parents remain scared of the police. They think the hospital has to inform the police when they come to the hospital.
- Parents of undocumented children are afraid they cannot pay the bill of the hospital. This, together with fear for the police, make parents wait a long time before they go to the hospital with their sick child.
- During the first interviews (2008), most professionals at the hospital were not or insufficiently informed about the rights and duties of undocumented children.
- During the interviews in 2009, professionals were all sufficiently informed.
- Two doctors (out of thirteen) only helped the undocumented children after payment. In 2009 this problem was solved and all doctors helped without paying at forehand.
- Emergency help was given at all circumstances.
- In 2008 only one hospital showed a protocol in case an undocumented migrant came to the counter of the hospital.
- In 2009 all thirteen hospitals had a protocol for the intake of undocumented migrants.

Talking about an intake protocol and the rights and duties of undocumented children during the interviews has helped health professionals to get informed. At the end undocumented children who need to get hospital healthcare benefit from this.

