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Costa Rica: Health Ministry Employees Protest Proposed Budget Cut

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Oct. 22, hundreds of Health Ministry employees launched a work stoppage and demonstrated in front of the national legislature building to protest the Treasury Ministry's proposal to cut the 1992 health budget from US\$32 million to US\$24 million. Health Minister Carlos Castro said he did not support the protest actions, but that he was attempting to persuade Treasury to "modify" the reduction. Health worker unions opted instead to lobby legislators, who will make the final decisions on next year's budget. Union spokespersons emphasized the generalized decline of health standards throughout the country. According to the unions, the Treasury Ministry's proposed budget would barely suffice to pay salaries, much less finance urgently needed public health programs. The union spokespersons also oppose attempts to privatize health care services. John Marin, director of the Health Ministry's anti-tuberculosis division, told journalists that the disease turned up in the late 1980s after many years of no reported cases. By 1989, 13 persons per 1,000 were diagnosed with tuberculosis, and in 1991, 17 per 1,000. Marin said the spread of the disease "reflects a deterioration of socio-economic conditions." In 1990, 17 cases of measles were reported, compared to an estimated 4,000 in the first eight months of 1991. The measles death toll is currently at 22. Malaria cases reported in 1990 totaled 700, and thus far in 1991, 2,301. Edgar Mohs, director of the Costa Rican Children's Hospital and former health minister, said the hospital treated 17 cases of malnutrition in 1990, compared to 40 since Jan. 1 this year. He attributed the deterioration of health standards to the government's failure to implement a clear public health strategy, ignorance and lack of political will. Health Ministry budget director Heibell Rodriguez noted that inadequate funding led to cuts in primary care programs geared toward preventive medicine. As a result, he said, the ministry devotes 95% of its budget to salaries and 5% to services. According to the Central American Economic Integration Secretariat (SIECA), hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants dropped from 405 in 1970 to 335 in 1989. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, 10/22/91)

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