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**Health care workers in an epidemy: Roles, rights and duties from a comparative viewpoint**

Irregardless of the advances in medicine, the threat of largescale epidemies still exists in the modern world. The danger of natural incidence of widespread deadly infectious diseases is amplified by the intercontinental travel and also by the bioterrorism threat. The danger of epidemics is once again shown, as the avian flu spreads stepbystep from Asia to Western countries.

An epidemy is a threat to the whole society, during which the interests of protecting public health may override the protection of individual rights. It is a public duty to prevent and fight epidemies. An important part of this public duty is borne by health care professionals. They are faced by the dangerous task of caring of the diseased and risking their health and lives, and also health and lives of their families whom they may infect. Recent epidemies, such as SARS outbreak, tested the willingness of health care professionals to report to work when a deadly contagious disease emerged. In the time of an epidemy, an effective functioning of the health care system is necessary; due to this, there has been for long an ethical obligation of health care professionals to take this risk and report to work even under such adverse circumstances.

Decisionmakers have to balance individual freedoms against the common good, fear for personal safety against the duty to treat the sick and economic losses against the need to contain the spread of a deadly disease. Some states, such as the Czech Republic, transformed the ethical obligation of health care workers into a strict legal duty; many others did not, keeping the healthcare workers relatively free to decide. In a situation of a grave threat, however, compliance even with a strict legal duty might be insufficient, in spite of the administrative and criminal sanctions. Furthermore, it is unfair to burden a small group, the health care workers, with all the risks and costs of promoting a common good. By offering fair compensation for any risks connected with fighting an epidemy, the governments can improve health care professionals compliance and further spread the burden of pursuing the public interest onto the whole society. The measures of compensation existing at present under the Czech law do not fully encompass all the risks taken, making the compensation insufficient. This Article tries to delimit the the scope of the professionalsґ legal duties that are effective for protection of the society under an epidemy and proposes several ways how to compensate them for the risks they are required to take.