



DIALYSIS: Patients receive dialysis because their kidneys have failed and can no longer fully filter the bloodstream. Dialysis takes over the function of the kidneys. But in Turkey, tens of thousands of patients are at risk as private dialysis centers face the threat of closure.

Dialysis centers sound alarm bell

A recent call from private dialysis center operators for government support sparks a new debate, as companies warn against an increased risk of loss of lives. Sector representatives claim thousands of patients are at risk if private dialysis centers go bankrupt, but a labor union representative says it is private health care itself that lies at the root of the problem

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A leading private kidney-dialysis organization claimed that almost all private dialysis centers would go bankrupt if the government does not offer a quick solution to improve their financial situation, adding that many patients could die.

"We are struggling to survive. Almost all 400 private centers [throughout Turkey] risk closing," said [Mustafa Işık](#), the head of the Private Dialysis Centers Association, or DIADER.

Speaking at a news conference in Istanbul last week, Işık said such centers employ 15,000 people, but 'nearly 10,000 of them' are at risk of being let go. Işık called on the Social Security Institution, or SGK, to review a decision about a cut-back on expenses that risks the lives of thousands of patients with chronic kidney disease. "We hope the government, which paid 500 million Turkish Liras for the H1N1 virus vaccine, will not leave 40,000 patients to their fate just to save 300 million Turkish Liras," he said.

Işık said it is impossible for the sector to keep private dialysis centers afloat under current conditions. "These centers, serving 40,000 out of 55,000 chronic kidney-disease patients, are in a coma," he said. "We are ... [preparing] to pull the plugs of dialysis machines."

Last year, 24 private dialysis centers closed down while 400 are currently operating.

The SGK has not increased the sec-

tor's budget for the past three years. It pays 138 liras to private centers per patient. But according to investors, the cost of one patient stands at 170 liras. Private investors say they have to subsidize 384 liras per month for each patient. Investors say their losses have reached 200 million liras. They maintain that as public health care is not sufficient to support all patients, if private centers are shut down, lives would be at risk.

At the mercy of balance sheets

But a labor union representative said the whole episode displays the damage private health care has wrought. Speaking to the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review, Songül Beydilli, a representative of the Labor Union of Public Employees in Health and Social Services, said health care should not be left to the mercy of balance sheets.

"All commercial enterprises are motivated by profit," Beydilli said. "Health care services should not be left to the mercy of private investors, especially when we are talking about kidney failure. The issue is not how much the investors have gained or lost, but that the majority of these patients have to receive dialysis from the private sector."

Beydilli accused the government of not fulfilling its duties as a provider of social services. "The state has transferred its responsibility to the private sector. It has left patients' fate to the mercy of private investors," she said.

The government has refused to allocate greater budgets to public health, Beydilli said. "Turkey would have more state-run dialysis centers if the state's financial resources had been allocated to public investments rather than to private investments," she said.

Meanwhile, an investor from the impoverished southeast said if the government does not offer a solution to their financial woes, his business faces the risk of closure.

"It's becoming unbearable," said Vahap Genç, owner of the Şanlı private dialysis center in Şanlıurfa.

"I do not know how long I can last in debt," he said. "I suffered a big loss last year. This year, my losses stand at 10,000 liras every month. Costs have increased but we have been serving our patients with the same prices."

Genç also drew attention to the piling up of debts in the private sector. "We have tried to keep the business afloat through bank loans. Currently, I have a debt of 180,000 liras. I do not know how to pay that back," he said.

"The sole responsibility for our plight rests with the Social Security Institution, because it is our only customer," he added.

Patients receive dialysis because their kidneys have failed and can no longer fully filter the bloodstream. Dialysis takes over the function of the kidneys, removing blood from the body and returning it cleansed.