

South Korea: Junior doctors strike amid concerns over low doctor-to-patient ratio

By  Katja Hamilton

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Around 10,000 junior doctors in South Korea have defied a government order to return to work.



Source: 123RF/svershinsky

They're protesting plans to increase the annual medical student intake in the country from approximately 3,000 to around 5,000, which forms part of their government's aims to boost annual medical school admissions by 65% in 2025.

This initiative is driven by the country's challenges stemming from a rapidly aging population and one of the lowest doctor-to-patient ratios among developed nations. (An aging population is statistically defined as a population with 7% or more of people aged 65 and over.)

However, despite the official calls for their return to work, which started two weeks ago, Korea's junior doctors have only intensified their strike and gathered for a mass rally, organised by the Korean Medical Association (KMA), on Sunday, 3 March 2024.

They oppose the prospect of greater competition and reduced income, and argue that the government should prioritise addressing pay and working conditions before attempting to increase the country's number of physicians.

Healthcare experts contend, too, that the reform will undermine both the quality of medical education and subsequent service provision. To this end, South Korea has a privatised healthcare system where procedures are tied to insurance payments.

Government implements tough measures

Meanwhile, Korea's Vice Health Minister, Park Min-soo said at a press conference on Monday, 4 March 2024, that only 565 junior doctors had returned to work and that the situation has warranted the government elevating its public-health alert to its highest on record. This, as a result of the ongoing cancellation of medical treatments and surgeries.

He said junior doctors who do not return to work will face a three-month suspension of their license and potentially damage their career prospects. But, senior doctors confirm that in reality medical professionals who strike against government orders in South Korea face either the suspension of their license, a fine or up to three years in prison.

Min-soo later announced that the government would implement measures to suspend the medical licenses of approximately 7,000 trainee doctors who had abandoned their positions.

The doctors on strike work mainly at urban hospitals assisting senior doctors and comprise a fraction of the 140,000 doctors in South Korea.

- Doctors in South Korea are among the best paid in the world with salaries far exceeding average pay. The country has 2.5 doctors per 1000 people.
- *In 2022, seniors comprised 5.9% of South Africa's population, indicating it's not yet aging. However, the UN predicts it will enter the "aging population" category by 2030, with seniors reaching 14% by 2060. With one doctor per 1,000 patients, without change, senior care could deteriorate amid an aging population, demanding more resources for health and welfare.*

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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