

## Direction Denmark

(‘Kierunek Dania’ – Gazeta Wyborcza, Monday March 8<sup>th</sup> 2004)

How foreign hospitals are recruiting Polish doctors. A typical conversation between two Polish surgeons: “Leae,” says the first. “No, that’s not right. You’ve got to hold the ‘e’ longer and pronounce it a little more hoarsely,” the second instructs. On Sunday the pilot stage for Polish doctors being selected to work in Denmark came to an end.

The first of the above-mentioned surgeons works in Poznań, the second in a county hospital in central Poland. After nine hours of learning Danish they took their first tests. In the hotel corridor they analyse whether to introduce themselves as doctors (as it should be) or as teachers – which would not be the best idea. Although these words are written differently: *lage* (pronounced *lee’ə*) – is a doctor - and *lare* (pronounced *le’ə*) – is a teacher - the pronunciation of the two words is treacherously similar.

We will pay you well...

Of the more than 50 doctors invited to Warsaw last weekend by the Swedish company Paragon (which recruits doctors to work in European countries) to test their language skills, 30 will get jobs in Denmark.

“We recruit specialists for work in hospitals in four Danish districts that order them,” says Paragon’s Martin Ratz. They willingly make the journeys from Wrocław, Poznań, Jarosławo, Szczecin, Bielsko, Kraków, Łębork, Ostrołęka and Katowice.

The Danes offer the doctors excellent terms: for a 37-hour working week they will get 30,000 zlotys gross a month. After tax the net figure comes to about half this.

“Several years ago it seemed that there were too many doctors in Denmark, so we drastically cut back on admissions to medicine studies. Today we’ve got to look abroad for specialists. There is no-one to treat us and it will take many years for this to change,” says Carsten Larsen, who represents the Nord Jylland district.

“We have work for surgeons, cardiologists, anesthetists, radiologists, pathomorphologists and clinical oncologists,” says Jens Peter Steensen from the Storstrom district (which has five hospitals).

...we are waiting patiently...

Paragon also invited the Polish doctors' future employers to the interviews. For the Polish physicians their first contact with the Danes came as something of a shock. They later recalled it in the hotel bar.

“From the director of the hospital I work in I hear only that I am a loss-maker. When I say I am over-worked and that that's dangerous when operating on patients he says if I don't like it I can F\*\*k off,” says one of the doctors.

In Warsaw they hear things like: “We are patiently waiting for you.” “You are important to us.” “You will belong to the town's financial elite” from their future employers.

“I felt valued, for the first time in my life. One of us believed that his child needed some form of rehabilitation treatment. He hadn't even finished speaking and the Danes had already started ringing from a mobile to set an appointment for his child to see a specialist!” the same doctor continues.

“Finally someone will pay us for our knowledge. I will never forget the day I got my first wage packet after I became a specialist – I was earning 1080 zlotys a month, with a 20 zloty raise,” says a surgeon from Poznań. He says about half of his friends from the clinic he works at are considering leaving Poland.

Another doctor says he is leaving because he can no longer take the vicious circle he has found himself in – in order to provide for his family (a wife and two kids) he has to work 70 hours a week. “There's money from working in several jobs at once, but I have no time for the kids,” he says.

...we will teach you a new language...

In Poland there are several companies that deal with the search for doctors and nurses for hospitals abroad – one of them is Paragon. In the last four years it has already sent 200 family doctors to Sweden.

“They have mastered the language, the patients like them and their employers are full of praise,” says Adam Ringer, one of the heads of Paragon, which is now recruiting specialists to work in Denmark, the UK and Holland and is also running another selection process for family doctors. “We send doctors to work only where they will have exactly the same terms and conditions as their local counterparts. Employers must sign open-ended agreements with them, help out in finding schools and nurseries for the children and help in finding accommodation,” says Ratz.



Jens Peter Steensen from the Danish county Storstrom shows doctors where are they going to work  
Fot. Igor Morye /

Paragon guarantees that the doctors know the language of the country they will be working in. “At the turn of May and June those doctors that have passed the preliminary tests start a seven-month course in Danish. We shut them up in a campus near Warsaw and although Danish is one of the hardest European languages we know they will master it,” adds Ratz. During the language course Paragon covers all living expenses and provides about 3,000 zlotys a month for the family of the doctors. Lessons are from Monday to Friday several hours a day.

...because you're professionals

“Being a doctor is the best profession in Europe and the Polish education system turns out excellently trained professionals,” says Ringer. But will Poland not face the same problem as Denmark, and earlier Sweden, in several years time? Who will treat us given that there appears to be no end in sight to the chaos in the Polish health services and doctors dreaming about getting out?

“Everyone has the right to choose where they work. At the moment it's hard to estimate if this will be a mass phenomenon. There are no indicators on which we can base any calculations. I think many doctors will still want to work in their own country,” says Ewa Kralowska, deputy minister for health.

In the time since the publication of our earlier article on the subject (“Outflow of doctors” ‘Odpływ lekarzy’ Gazeta Wyborcza, Feb. 26) the European media has become interested in the subject. “The UK aims to bring in 5,000 doctors over the next seven years. The BBC says they may come from Poland and that a debate had started in Poland on the subject of the migration of doctors. In turn, Danish radio in Copenhagen asked me if we knew how many physicians want to come and several days ago I talked to the German station ARD. There is some concern in Germany about the influx of cheap labour from Poland,” says Adam Koziarkiewicz, an analyst who prepared a report for the High Chamber of Physicians on how the Polish labour market will change after Poland’s accession to the EU.

The Danes, who last weekend first, met their future employees, are not afraid of an invasion of Polish specialists. “We will show in practise what European integration means,” they joke: “We are the happiest nation in Europe. Come to us!”

None of the doctors quoted in the article choose to give their names.

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According to analysts’ estimates, over the next few years as many as 60,000 doctors positions may become vacant. The size of this deficit results amongst other things from an EU directive which forbids doctors from working more than 48 hours a week (EU countries are to sign this into law by September).

“After May 1 the problem of recognising Polish medical qualifications will disappear. Language will no longer be a barrier. Among doctors in the 25-35 age group about one third of practising doctors may leave Poland, that is about 10,000 people. We may also have too few doctors. Unfortunately, no-one in Poland is dealing with this,” says Adam Koziarkiewicz.

*No one of the doctors was willing to present his or her name*