

NEWS



Hamburg's refugee policy is criticised after pregnant woman sent on long train trip miscarries

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Hamburg

The German Medical Association has criticised the state of Hamburg's refugee policy after a 20 year old, high risk pregnant woman from Guinea had a miscarriage after she, her husband, and their toddler son were sent on a 12 hour train and bus trip from Hamburg to a new refugee centre near Dortmund, in North-Rhine Westphalia.

In a press statement Frank Ulrich Montgomery, president of the German Medical Association, said he was "shocked" to hear of the woman's miscarriage,¹ which occurred on 2 March 2015 and was reported in investigative news reports by the regional public radio and television broadcasters NDR in Hamburg and WDR in Cologne.^{2 3}

The news reports said that shortly before the train trip the woman, in her fifth month of pregnancy, had been in hospital for two days because of vaginal bleeding. Doctors at the hospital labelled her pregnancy as high risk and advised bed rest and as little movement as possible. But she and her family were subsequently assigned by Hamburg refugee case workers to leave Hamburg by so called "regional trains," widely regarded in Germany as being uncomfortable, bumpy, loud, and slow, with numerous stops.

After news reports emerged of the woman's miscarriage, Hamburg senators demanded a response from Hamburg's Interior Office, which administers refugee affairs. The office replied, said the news reports, with a written statement that case workers knew that the woman was pregnant but were not aware that she had been in the hospital and that the pregnancy was a high risk one. They said that the family had agreed to the train trip. Those assertions were contradicted by the woman and her husband in news reports, which also said that Hamburg prosecutors were investigating the case for potential wrongdoing. Montgomery, a Hamburg native who is a radiologist at University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf, said that the case needed to be "carefully clarified" as it would be a "scandal" if it were proved true that case workers knew of the woman's medical condition before the train trip. Referring to a similar case in 2010, Montgomery said, "It is tragic that once again something so terrible had to happen."

In the 2010 case a woman from Ghana at "the end of her pregnancy" was moved twice from Hamburg to a refugee centre in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. She subsequently had a miscarriage. At the time Hamburg's interior minister—at Montgomery's urging—decreed that no refugees in the third trimester of pregnancy would be moved out of Hamburg. But

after a change of government in 2011 the new interior minister rescinded the decree. Generally, refugees up to eight months pregnant are now deemed able to travel.

Montgomery said that the German Medical Association "demands" that the government of Hamburg once again prohibit relocation of pregnant refugees in the third trimester, adding that, "of course," the travel prohibition should also apply to women in earlier stages of high risk pregnancies.

"Pregnant women need special humane and medical care," he said.

The woman from Guinea and her husband, the Sows, told their side of the story to NDR.⁴ They said that they had left Guinea to seek a better life for their children. They arrived in Hamburg in February after a journey of several months. After Mrs Sow was released from the hospital, they reported to Hamburg's "first reception centre" for refugees. Mr Sow said that he had told case workers of his wife's medical condition and showed them the hospital discharge letter. He "begged" case workers to allow his wife to stay in Hamburg until the baby was born. Mr Sow told NDR, "They only said that when you are in the train you need to just not move."

The 400 km train trip was difficult for the young pregnant mother, the Sows told NDR. With their toddler son and two suitcases holding all their belongings, they had to switch trains five times during the trip, often having to run to the next train with Mr Sow carrying the suitcases and Mrs Sow the 15 kg boy. They once missed a train connection and had to wait for the next train. In Dortmund they were put on a bus for the 120 km trip to a refugee centre in Burbach, which is responsible for refugees from Guinea and where they arrived on Saturday 28 February.

"Then my wife began to cry," Mr Sow told NDR. "She told me, 'I am bleeding again.'"

No medical care was available at the refugee centre on weekends. Case workers offered to call an ambulance, Mr Sow told NDR, but only if it was truly a dangerous emergency situation, otherwise it would be better to wait until Monday, they said. Mr Sow was scared and did not demand an ambulance. On Monday Mrs Sow was transported to the hospital, where she lost her unborn child and was described as fortunate to survive the ordeal.

1 Hamburg: Schwangere nicht umverteilen! Für einen menschlichen Umgang mit Flüchtlingen. www.bundesaerztekammer.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/news-detail/hamburg-schwangere-nicht-umverteilen.

- 2 Baby-Tod: Ärztekammer kritisiert Senat. <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Baby-Tod-Aerztekammer-kritisiert-Senat,burbach104.html>.
- 3 Staatsanwaltschaft Siegen liegt Anzeige vor: Schwangere verliert Baby nach Flüchtlingstransport. <http://www1.wdr.de/studio/siegen/themadestages/fehlgeburt-fluechtling100.html>.

- 4 Ist Behörde mitverantwortlich für Baby-Tod? <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Ist-Behoerde-mitverantwortlich-fuer-Baby-Tod,burbach100.html>.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;350:h3538

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