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Covid-19: Poland's medical council sees mass resignations over government inaction on pandemic

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Thirteen of the 17 members of the medical council that advises Poland's government on its pandemic response have resigned saying that ministers are ignoring their advice, downplaying the risk, and encouraging vaccine denial as the country slides into a potentially catastrophic fifth wave.

In a statement sent to Reuters news agency, the 13 epidemiologists and infectious disease experts blamed their decision on a lack of cooperation from the government.

"The mismatch between scientific and medical rationale and practice has become especially glaring in the context of very limited action in the face of the autumn wave and then the threat of the omicron variant, despite the enormous number of deaths expected," they wrote.¹

The experts wrote that they have "observed a growing tolerance of the behaviour of people who deny the risk posed by covid-19 and the importance of vaccinations in the fight against the pandemic, which was also reflected in the statements of members of the government."

The doctors wrote, "As the medical council, we have been accused of insufficient influence over the government's actions," explaining that they were experiencing a "lack of political possibilities to introduce the optimal and globally tested methods of fighting the pandemic."

The prime minister's office responded to the resignations in a statement, saying, "It is the role of the government to make decisions based on the various positions of experts—the medical council, economists, and experts from other areas affected by the epidemic."²

The resignations come days after the government defended a regional education official who described coronavirus vaccination as an "experiment" and two weeks after a health committee meeting of Poland's legislature, the Sejm, invited dozens of openly anti-vaccine associations to speak, in what opposition media branded a "festival of denial."

Anti-vaccine sentiment is rife in the ruling nationalist and populist PiS (Law and Justice) party, and Poland has one of the lowest immunisation rates in Europe, with just 56% of its population fully vaccinated. Last week the country passed the milestone of 100 000 official covid-19 deaths, and its official per capita death rate, at 2708 per million, is far above the EU average.

But even these numbers are an undercount, Krzysztof Filipiak, the deputy rector of the Medical University of Warsaw, told the website onet.pl. Filipiak, one of

the 13 experts to resign, argued that the pandemic has claimed more than 200 000 lives in Poland.

"Half of those are confirmed cases of covid-19," he said. "The other half are either unconfirmed cases or collateral—deaths that can be traced back to the paralysis of the health service, the failure to treat other illnesses, the deterioration of healthcare, and the collapse of the health system."

On 17 January, Poland's health minister Adam Niedzielski said that the country is entering a fifth wave, with new infections soon likely to top 20 000 a day for the first time. That figure could rise to 60 000 a day by mid-February, he warned.

The new cases are concentrated in Poland's rural east, where vaccine scepticism and even denial of the pandemic's existence are commonplace. Rules requiring mask wearing indoors and at public events are broadly ignored in Poland. At a recent football match against Hungary a completely maskless Warsaw crowd cheerfully disregarded reminders over the loudspeaker that masks were mandatory. Further east, wearing a mask into a shop often attracts hostile comments, although theoretically it is a legal requirement.

The government is paralysed, critics say, because the hostility to vaccination and pandemic control measures is coming mostly from its own most fervent supporters. Deputy Health Minister Waldemar Kraska recently told radio broadcaster RMF that the government had not introduced a shutdown because Poles have a "genetic resistance to regulations" developed over centuries. "If we don't enforce the existing restrictions it won't help if we introduce additional ones," he said.

1 Polish covid advisers quit over lack of science influence on policy. Reuters. 14 January 2022. www.reuters.com/world/europe/polish-covid-19-advisers-quit-protest-govt-limited-efforts-2022-01-14.

2 CIR statement on the medical council. [Polish] 14 January 2022. www.gov.pl/web/premier/oswiadczenie-cir-w-sprawie-rady-medycznej.

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