

Roda – Parents in Action

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Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

crc@ohchr.org

The Special Rapporteur for the Right to Health

srhealth@ohchr.org

Council of Europe, Children's Rights (via webform)

Child Rights International Network contact@crin.org

European Association for Children in Hospital

info@each-for-sick-children.org

UNICEF Croatia info@unicef.hr

5 June 2020

Subject: Disproportionate measures taken during COVID-19 in Croatia that are putting children's health and wellbeing in jeopardy

Dear Madames, Dear Sirs,

We are writing to you from Roda - Parents in Action, a Croatian NGO that has been active in the area of parents' and children's rights in Croatia since 2001. Roda has a history of working as a watchdog organisation in healthcare, especially in the fields of maternity and pediatric care. We have sent shadow reports to your offices and other human rights bodies over the past 19 years.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Roda has been collecting reports from parents about the fact that parents of children who are in hospital are not allowed to visit or be with them during their hospitalisation. The rationale provided for this have been epidemiological measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When parents ask when hospitals will be open to visitors, they have reported being told "When the Civil Protection Authority approves" although the CPA, a department in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, does not make these decisions, which are in fact up to individual hospital departments.

This has happened in hospitals and in departments throughout the country, including those caring for both acute and chronically-ill patients.

Roda has written to the Ministry of Health and other relevant organisations in Croatia on this topic (UNICEF Croatia, the Ombudsperson for Children, relevant healthcare provider organisations) but have not received any response from relevant institutions.

Some of the problems we have reports on include:

- Parents not being able to visit their premature infants - in some cases parents have not seen their infants in six or more weeks. This has been the case at some or all points during the COVID-19 pandemic in all of Croatia's teaching hospitals (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek), which care for the smallest, most critical premature infants and when parents are let into the hospitals, this is often followed by a television news crew (reporters do not carry the same germs parents do); mothers cannot stay with their hospitalized infants;

- Parents not being able to visit or see their critically and seriously ill children at Zagreb Clinical Hospital's Rebro - even though some of them require palliative care. Furthermore, mothers have been separated from their critically ill infants immediately after birth and not being able to see them for weeks
- Mothers are allowed to bring breast milk only once per day, without seeing their infants
- In hospitals where it was possible to be hospitalised with children, parents who had with their children on the ward for ten or more days removed from the hospital as soon as a COVID patient was diagnosed in that city or hospital
- Parents not being able to stay in hospital with their acutely ill or injured children

It is important to note that having a parent accompany a child in hospital is a right that children in Croatia have great difficulty realising in practice, even in normal times; there are no national guidelines on parents accompanying children during hospitalisation and individual departments make rules autonomously, without any accountability measures. Even when parents are allowed to accompany children, they must often pay a per diem fee, and only one parent can be present at a time. A bad situation has been made worse by COVID-19 and parents who cannot afford to pay these costs are discriminated against.

Croatia's COVID-19 epidemic has been very mild in comparison to other countries, capacities in hospitals were never overwhelmed and despite the fact that the situation has normalised, kindergartens and schools have opened, the majority of hospitals remain closed to parents accompanying children. The government and professional organisations remain silent on this problem.

We ask you to **urge the Croatian Government to implement the following measures:**

- Implement measures that will ensure that parents can accompany their hospitalised children free of charge
- Plan for parent accompaniment in renovations to departments that care for children and in children's hospitals (especially those that will happen as a response to the earthquake in Croatia's capital, which happened in March this year).

We urge **you** to:

- Investigate the situation and provide explicit guidelines on how to ensure children's rights to accompaniment in health facilities can be realised
- Send a strong message to governments that children have the right to parental accompaniment when hospitalised

As health systems around the world prepare for a potential second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the upcoming months, planning for respecting the human rights of the youngest and most vulnerable is imperative.

Respectfully,

Roda - Parents in Action

