

## ESCALATING SCANDAL AT THE SKOPJE GYNAECOLOGY CLINIC

### Health authorities silent on yet another infant death

Only a few days after the scandal at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje on the death of 80 infants in the first six months of the year, 20 of whom in two weeks, a new case of infant death shook the hospital again. According to the documents and the her medical history, the female patient no. 8261 K.S. from the Skopje village of Batinci, was brought at the Clinic as an urgent case with placental abruption. "Fokus" talked to some of the families who have suffered similar tragedies. After a while, when the shock and pain slightly subside, they decide to share their hospital ordeal with the public, describe the attitude of doctors and nurses and the conditions under which they were treated. Some of them even consider pressing charges against the Clinic or against the gynaecologists who delivered the babies. We have also received information of several complaints from women who gave birth to the Ministry of Health.

**Author: Irena MULACHKA**

The Montenegrin Minister of Health, **Mr. Miodrag Radunović**, resigned two years ago after the death of an infant from an infection, in the hospital in Bjelo Polje.

He appeared on TV and announced his resignation to the Montenegrin public due to the death of the newborn, which caused the break out of a scandal related to the dysfunctional health system.

According to the media, the Health Committee of the Montenegrin Assembly and all MPs unanimously decided that Minister Radunović and the Director of the hospital where the incident happened, **Mr. Tomislav Jeremić**, should be heard and asked to explain the conditions in which the babies were born and treated and how it came about for the unhygienic conditions to be the main reason for infecting five newborns. In the meantime, the heads of departments for gynaecology and neonatology were replaced, while the Director resigned for ethical reasons.

Unlike Montenegro, the situation in Macedonia after publishing the scandalous data that some 80 infants had died in six months alone, 20 of whom in the last two weeks, at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje, did not produce the same or similar effect. Neither **Mr. Nikola Todorov**, Minister of Health, nor **Ms. Marija Hadzi-Lega**, Director of the Gynaecology Clinic, felt responsible to explain the events at the Clinic. Neither of them explained the reason behind this high mortality rate of the infants in six months, nor gave a statement on the subject, let alone resign from their positions for ethical reasons. Todorov was deeply involved in the negotiations for solving the political crisis, while the Director had just returned from her summer holidays.

This scandal is not only about the doctors' mistakes, i.e. incompetence in performing operations and the hospital-acquired infections of women who gave birth. Doctors claim that there are faults in the system that have been ruining the Macedonian health care for years, which causes patients, and in this case infants to suffer the

most. According to them, the lack of organization and gynaecologists, paediatricians and anaesthesiologists in hospitals in other cities across the country contribute to the practice of transferring all critical cases of newborn babies to the Gynaecology Clinic. Thus, the blame falls on Minister Todorov, who praises the “reformed health system” on press conferences held every day, although the reality is quite opposite, and the health system is actually in a deep state of coma. So, if one survives this ordeal, they’ll live to tell the tale!

## **NEW CASE OF INFANT DEATH**

A week has hardly passed since the scandal revealing that 80 babies died in six months, 20 of whom in the last two weeks, at the Clinic of Gynaecology and Obstetrics in Skopje, when another infant died at the Clinic, raising the number of infant deaths. The case was reported on Monday, on the morning meeting of the Medical Board of the Clinic, where the reports about the situation at the Clinic during the weekend and the night shifts are reviewed.

According to our hospital sources, the last case of infant mortality happened Sunday morning, although the baby was delivered several days before. According to the medical history of patient no. 8261, the woman who gave birth is the 34-year-old **H.S.** from the Skopje village of Batinci, born in 1982, brought to the hospital as an urgent case. Our hospital sources claim that the patient was brought with worsened health condition caused by placental abruption and heavy bleeding, which means that the complications occurred as a result of the oxygen deprivation and loss of contact between the mother’s uterus and the baby.

The C-section was performed in the 36-gestation week of pregnancy, on 29 June, between 12.30 and 13.15. The infant died in less than a few days. The baby weighed 3,090 grams and was 53 cm long. It is important to note that this was not a doctor’s mistake, as the patient was not hospitalized at the Clinic at all, but was urgently taken to surgery. Our newsroom knows the identity of the gynaecologist-obstetrician who made the C-section, as well as the name of the gynaecologist who set the diagnosis, but we decided not to reveal their names.

According to the documents available to us, in most of the cases the newborns died during deliveries performed with caesarean sections. One of them is the 39-year-old patient from Skopje, who, on 14 February 2016, gave birth at the Gynaecology Clinic. She delivered a baby girl who weighed 2,300 grams and was 45 cm long, but the baby died in a few days. At that time, several other babies soon died at the Clinic, which caused shock and revolt in their families, as they could not believe what they have endured through the labyrinths of the Macedonian health system.

“Fokus” talked to some of the families who survived these tragedies. They say that after a while, when the shock and pain slightly subside, they decide to share their hospital ordeal with the public, describe the attitude of doctors and nurses attitude and the conditions under which they were treated. Some of them even consider pressing charges against the Clinic or against the gynaecologists who delivered the babies. We have also received information of several complaints to the Ministry of Health from women who gave birth at the Clinic.

In the previous edition, we revealed the cases of several women who lost their newborn babies at the Gynaecology Clinic in the last six months. One of them is the 25-year-old **I.B.**, born in 1991, who delivered her baby boy with caesarean section at the Clinic on 10 June, but in less than a few days, on 13 June, the baby died. In a different case, the 35-year-old **M.J.** from Skopje, delivered a stillborn baby with caesarean section on 24 June.

An additional problem at the Clinic, as doctors claim, is that the air-conditioning and the ventilation systems have not been working for weeks in the new building which has existed for only five years. This problem was being solved in around the days marked with the deaths of the infants. Moreover, the staff at the Clinic have not had toilet paper for weeks, which according to them proves that the hygiene at the hospital is at a very low level, as one of the reasons behind hospital-acquired infections. In the meantime, interpersonal relations between doctors and other medical staff are another issue of concern. Part of them support the Director, while others accuse her of mobbing, pressure, threats and throwing them out of the offices they have been working in for years.

## **BACTERIA AND INFECTIONS VICIOUS KILLERS AT THE GYNAECOLOGY CLINIC**

Premature deliveries, hospital-acquired infections and incompetence on the part of some doctors, are indicated as the most common reasons behind the increased infant mortality. So far, there have been several cases at the Gynaecology Clinic when younger gynaecologists made wrong assessments with respect to the delivery time of the patient, the volume of amniotic fluid, their due date, the proper fetal development, any registered anomalies, etc.

For some time now, the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje has been shaken by scandals, while the operation rooms have sealed the destinies of many families. We will mention only a few cases of patients who passed through horror in the new building of the Clinic. One of them is the 36-year-old **Emilija Nikolova** from Strumica, who claims she has gone through hell at the Gynaecology Clinic, which is why she decided to share her “bitter” experience.

*-I am not surprised that so many babies die, because as women with pregnancy complications come from other cities, they are immediately sent to the delivery room, even if they are not due for delivery. So, if the baby is fortunate enough it will survive. I was transferred with an Ambulance car to Skopje for bleeding in the 31-st week of pregnancy. I was hospitalized at the Department for Pathology at first. However, since there was not enough room, on the third day I was transferred to the Intensive Care under the pretence that I would be placed in safe hands. The situation there was horrific, women who gave birth died there on a daily basis. I started bleeding as a result of the stressed I endured there. The bleeding had just calmed down, when I was hooked up to the CTG machine which allegedly indicated that something was wrong with the placenta. The main problem was that there was no room for hospitalizing the patients. So, every night they performed some preterm deliveries and babies were dying – claims Nikolova for “Fokus”. She adds that the hell she had gone through at the Clinic had left her with terrifying trauma.*

*- I couldn't go to the bathroom for five days because of stress. I was prepared for a caesarean section and gave birth to a baby boy who was taken to an incubator at the Intensive Care due to complications. When I asked how my baby was, the head of the Department started to shout at me, saying that I should be happy the baby was alive and that I should not ask too many questions and pray for his survival, because the worst could still happen to him. We passed through a horrendous ordeal, but what I know for sure is that I will never give birth to another baby at the Clinic again. I now know why babies die at Gynaecology Clinic, adds 36-year-old Nikolova.*

In her opinion, due to the lack of room, many of the women waiting to give birth were lying in the hall, there were cockroaches everywhere, and the toilets were like a scene from a horror movie.

Another 24-year-old patient also went through a frightening experience and her life was in danger. She gave birth to a healthy baby at the Clinic more than a year ago. Our hospital sources claim that in a few days, while the new mother was lying at the Clinic, she contracted bacteria, her health worsened, after which doctors had to perform a hysterectomy. "Fokus" journalists met with the mother, who wanted to stay anonymous, but told us everything that she had gone through during her stay at the Clinic:

*-One word is enough to describe what is happening there – horror. When you get there, you see a new building and at first glance everything looks perfect. However, the hygiene is terrible there, so it is no wonder that women giving birth and their babies contract streptococcus and klebsiella. Cockroaches are everywhere, sheets are dirty and there is no wonder why there are hospital-acquired infections. The attitude of nurses and paramedics is bad and arrogant. I have no uterus "thanks" to the bacteria, I hardly survived and now I cannot have other children. And we wonder why the mothers-to-be save money and deliver their babies in private hospitals – says the 26-year-old mother.*

Several years ago, "Fokus" wrote about the case of the two-month baby from another town, whose arm was amputated as a result of the gangrene caused by infection.

The baby's parents complained to the Minister of Health, Todorov, but this case has had no closure to date. According to the documents, the case involves a baby girl, who, as the parents claim in the complaint submitted to the Minister, contracted streptococcus and staphylococcus, which along with the doctors' negligence and reckless treatment were the reasons that sealed the fate of the child.

*-Our child was born on 14 October 2011, as a premature baby and because of that she had to stay at the Clinic for further treatment. We did not have any children for 10 years, and our joy was overshadowed by this tragedy. The child had white swellings on its hand, but no one wanted to explain to us what was happening. The only information that we were given was that the forearm of our daughter should be amputated, but no one explained us how and why – reads the complaint to the Minister.*

After filing another complaint, the parents succeeded in getting the medical records of the baby on 11 November 2011, which, according to them, contains many inconsistent and unreasonable details. According to the document from the Gynaecology Clinic, the newborn had streptococcus, which caused an early onset of neonatal sepsis.

But, that is not all. According to the documents available to us, three babies died in one shift in the eve of 2012. Two of the babies were premature, born in the 26-gestation week of pregnancy, while the third one was born in the 31-gestation week and had chances to survive, if it was not infected with the deadly bacteria klebsiella.

Another problem in the whole story is the fact that, despite the many cases of infant mortality at the Clinic and different infections, the health authorities did not signal the red alarm in order to find a way to prevent or at least decrease the alarming numbers.

Ten days after the scandal, the Director of the Gynaecology Clinic, **Marija Hadzi-Lega**, is still nowhere to be found. As we have learned, after the scandal was revealed, she came to work last Wednesday, after taking her vacation. Our sources claim that the Director argued with the staff during the meeting of the Medical Board, claiming she knew who was taking the documents from the Clinic and threatened to punish the person who did that.

## **CLOSED GYNAECOLOGY WARD, LACK OF GYNEACOLOGISTS, DEAD BABIES...**

The doctors claim that statistically the number of dead babies at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje increases because the hospital is a regional centre where all critical cases from around the country and from the private hospitals are referred to. According to them, even if a small complication occurs, the patient giving birth is immediately transferred to the Gynaecology Clinic where there are over 50 gynaecologists.

The reason behind the “black” statistics could be also related to the fact that many gynaecology wards in other cities across Macedonia have been closed and have not been functioning for years, some due to poor hygienic conditions, others due to the lack of gynaecologists, paediatricians and anaesthesiologists. However, those that are still operational work with one or two gynaecologists in cities with 70,000-100,000 citizens.

Let's start at the very beginning. In hospitals across the country there are 69 gynaecologists-obstetricians and 120 primary care gynaecologists, which means that 700,000 women in the country are “in the hands” of 189 gynaecologists in total. According to the data we possess, there are six gynaecologists in the hospital of Strumica, while in Valandovo, Gevgelija, Radovish and Negotino there is not even a single gynaecologist. There are four gynaecologists-obstetricians at the Shtip Clinical Hospital, but when and if needed, the primary care gynaecologists also work in shifts. In cities, such as Debar and Kichevo, there are two gynaecologists working in each city, five in Ohrid, nine in Struga and Bitola, respectively, and only one in

Kavadarci. There is no hospital in Negotino where patients can give birth, while the gynaecology wards in Kratovo and Kriva Palanka have been closed.

The gynaecologists we talked to claim that the problem is in the system, that the lack of gynaecologists is alarming, and that it is frightening to have so many babies die in 21-st century.

*-The number of deceased babies at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje is frightening. I can't speak of the doctors' expertise. The premature deliveries, as well as the hospital-acquired infections are some of the reasons. We should also distinguish between death occurring during the delivery or post partum, or if the case involves a stillborn baby. One thing is for sure, the lack of gynaecologists results in growing numbers of patients at the Gynaecology Clinic of in Skopje – says Dr. Goce Chakarovski, a gynaecologist.*

Still, he claims that he cannot understand how so many infections and complications can occur in a new building as the Gynaecology Clinic. In his opinion, the motivation behind the management's urge to hide the number of the deceased babies is also not clear, since these are public data.

*-By hiding the numbers, they only incite suspicions. Doctors' mistakes and hospital-acquired infections happen everywhere in the world, but the sooner we face the reasons and numbers, the sooner we will solve the problems. Problems should be shared, so they could be solved. In fact, the problem is in the system. That is why, in such cases, in other parts of the world, there would be immediate reactions, debate and resignations. Only here, no one from the health authorities is concerned – Chakarovski adds.*

These frightening numbers are regularly swept under the carpet, while no one is found responsible for the entire strategy of wrong management in the health system. All women in their reproductive age are left to only 120 primary care gynaecologists overwhelmed by bureaucracy and on the verge of extinction, which is why this condition results with such "black" figures.

Frame:

## **TODOROV IS KEEPING SILENT ABOUT THE SCANDAL, WHILE PROMOTING PROJECTS FOR INFANT MORTALITY REDUCTION**

In the meantime, while the scandal at the Skopje Gynaecology Clinic was revealed in public, the Minister of Health decided to keep silent. However, he held press-conference where he praised the Ministry for co-financing 47 general practitioners to become gynaecologists. According to the plan, the doctors will pay only 10% of the total amount for their specialisation, and after completing their studies, they will have an agreement with the Health Insurance Fund. Todorov added that this would strengthen the expertise of the gynaecologists in the country, which will contribute to a decrease in the number of infant mortality.

## WILL THE MINISTER OF HEALTH SURVIVE THE LAST MEGASCANDAL?

**Nikola Todorov is Gruevski's stillborn baby**

Macedonian health care has been shaken by a megascandal, since doctors from the Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic shared information with the public that 80 newborn babies had died in the hospital over a period of six months. "Fokus" magazine has documents, names and surnames of the patients who gave birth at the Clinic and lost their babies, as well as the names of the gynecologists who performed the deliveries or cesarean section procedures. We have decided not to reveal the identity of these doctors. Hospital infections that mothers and babies contract whilst in hospital are indicated as the most common reason for the increased death rate of newborns. Sources from the Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic claim that these figures are taken out of context. Director Hadji-Lega is on vacation, and an internal investigation has been conducted at the Clinic in order to reveal who took the patients' documents. Part of the hospital histories are kept under lock to prevent any access to them even by doctors. Minister Todorov keeps silent instead of taking responsibility, while the Ministry of Health replied using the vocabulary of the political party VMRO-DPMNE.

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Only five days before the early parliamentary elections, on 31 May 2011, former Prime Minister **Nikola Gruevski** cut the red ribbon of the new Clinic of Gynecology and Obstetrics' building in Skopje, which was built for entire 10 years. The old scandals moved to the new building as well. The opening of the building was announced three times in the course of only few months. The first time there was even an advertisement broadcasted in the pro-government media, but the building was not opened; then, the media were invited and the guests arrived with gifts and flowers, but the ribbon cutting ceremony was postponed yet again; finally, the building was opened only a few days prior to the elections.

The Government leadership promoted the object, despite the absence of building use permits. The building was half-empty, with insufficient medical equipment and nonfunctional elevators; notwithstanding this situation, the then Prime Minister, the former Minister of Health, Mr. **Bujar Osmani**, directors of the clinics and doctors had a photo shoot in front of the Clinic.

Since then, the health authorities have been constantly boasting with the new medical equipment, which was brought to the hospital through a Government tender, costing astonishing 100 million Euros. Nevertheless, it has not diminished the scandals that are shaking the Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic.

For five years since the Clinic was opened, the number of deceased newborns has been on a constant rise, but the problem is that the alarming numbers are covered up by the competent institutions and no one takes responsibility for the lost lives, the complications during deliveries, the causes of death and the pain of the families...

On the other hand, the problems of this kind are solved quickly and expeditiously in the civilized world, ministers of health take moral or political responsibility (resignation), while patients decide whether they will press charges for a doctor's mistake or request indemnification.

On the contrary, the competent institutions in Macedonia have been concealing official data for years. The only figures that can be found are in the State Statistical Office, according to which, in the first three months of 2016, 61 babies died, and these figures alone should turn on the red alarm. However, with the exception of this official data, no one from the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje has ever informed the public: how many babies die annually, why is baby mortality increasing and what are the most common reasons for that? The figures are kept as a state secret or as "strictly confidential information".

## **BABIES DIE AS IN AFRICA**

The last unofficial data show that 80 newborn babies have died at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje in the last six months, of whom 20 only in the last two weeks. These data were revealed at the Medical Board meeting at the Clinic a few days ago, in which around 70 doctors participate daily and they were stunned by the shocking numbers. They submit a report on their work (report log) on a daily basis and gynecologists are the first to inform what was happening during the night shift; then the pediatricians from Intensive Care Unit explain how many children were connected to respiratory equipment, whether someone's condition has deteriorated, if there are any deceased babies and how many patients have been released. Furthermore, the programme for surgeries is announced twice a week at the Medical Board.

While the atmosphere at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje has been strained to a boiling point for almost a year, the problems surfaced during the last month when part of the employees decided to share with the public what was happening at the Clinic, how many newborns died and what were the main causes for that.

"Fokus" possesses documents, names and surnames of patients who gave birth at the Clinic and lost their babies, as well as the names of the gynecologists who delivered the babies or made cesareans. The Gynecology Clinic in Skopje is a regional center, where all critical cases are referred to, both from hospitals from other cities across the country and from private hospitals. Our newsroom has decided to conceal the identity of the doctors who delivered the babies or performed the surgical procedures.

According to the documents we possess, the last case of a newborn death occurred on Friday, 24 June, when the stillborn baby was delivered with a C-section after 2 p.m. The baby girl's weight was 3830 grams and she was 52 cm long. According to the hospital history number, 7659, the patient was 35-year **M. J.** from Skopje, who had been hospitalized at the Clinic since 1 June. During that period, she was allowed to go home twice, at weekends. The patient also has a 7-year-old child.

Our sources comment that after the C-section, the patient was in the Intensive Care Unit, and was later transferred to the Pathological Pregnancy Ward. In the



meantime, the patient was at the Clinic for almost 20 days because, according to doctors, she had a lot of amniotic fluid and was waiting for a C-section to be scheduled. When she was on the surgery list, the doctors discovered that the patient carried a stillborn baby. The cesarean was performed by a gynecologist-surgeon, assisted by two other assistants, while the diagnosis was made by another doctor.

The exact reasons – the cause of death of the stillborn, whether it was a doctor's mistake and who will take responsibility for the lost life – are still not revealed. The Institute for Pathology is expected to issue the obduction findings.

Two weeks before, another newborn died at the Gynecology Clinic. According to the documents, the patient was 25-year old **I. B.**, born in 1991. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy on 10 June, who weighed 2800 grams and was 50 cm long.

As stated in the patient's history, the patient had a C-section at 9.55 p.m. with the diagnosis "min. APGAR-SCORE 4/4 low". After only three days, on 13 June, the baby died. Two more newborns died on the same date, which according to doctors, is an alarming situation that requires immediate reaction and measures in order to prevent the increasing mortality trend.

As soon as this issue was revealed to the public, several other patients called us to talk about their ordeal through the health care "labyrinths" of the Gynecology Clinic. One of them stated on social networks that several weeks before, when she lost her own baby in the fifth month of pregnancy, staggering three more babies died at the Clinic at that same time.

5000-5500 deliveries are performed annually at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje, and in the first six months of 2016, there were approximately 2700 deliveries.

## **THE HOSPITAL HISTORIES OF PATIENTS ARE HELD CONCEALED**

As the story unfolds, more and more tragic destinies of mothers and their babies come to the surface. In the documents available to "Fokus", there is information regarding patients who lost their babies, where they come from, the babies' gender, their weight and length, as well as their diagnoses.

The data reveal a newborn death in February this year. The 39-year-old mother from Skopje had her baby on 14 February. The C-section was performed between 8 and 9 in the morning, at the end of the night shift. The patient gave birth to a baby-girl who weighed 2300 grams and was 45 cm long. The odd thing in the whole story is that the document we possess does not contain any data on the history number of the patient, although it is the usual practice for all hospitalized patients to have one. The document contains only the basic information about the mother – name and surname, baby's gender, where she comes from and baby's weight.

According to hospital sources, the baby was born alive, but it is unknown for how long it was alive and what were the exact reasons for its death. Our newsroom has the name of the gynecologist who performed the C-section, but we have decided not to reveal his identity.

The gynecologists we talked about this subject claim that the most common reason for the increased mortality rate of newborns are the hospital acquired infections that mothers and babies contract during their hospital stay. However, they stress that there are certain mistakes that doctors make as well, since some of them do not do their job properly, i.e. they are incompetent to treat their patients. Furthermore, the reasons for these alarming data may also include premature births.

*- Detailed records about the number of newborn deaths, the problems and the ways to solve them have not been kept in all gynecology hospitals since 2005. It is not enough to summarize the numbers at the end of the year and stop at that. The situation must be regularly and continuously monitored throughout the year and the weaknesses, which are far too many, must be detected. The numbers are not a matter of statistics, and they should be the responsibility of the Institute of Public Health and the Gynecology Clinic. They must resolve the weaknesses. Other problems include non-hygienic conditions at the Clinic, infections, sepsis, staff changes, inexperienced and young nurses, omissions of the services and premature babies – this is the claim of gynecologists who want to stay anonymous fearing of consequences.*

According to the procedure, after babies die, they are taken for an autopsy at the Institute of Pathology, managed by Director **D-r Gordana Petrushevska**. Autopsy results are usually awaited for one or two months, and they should give the final answer and cite the exact causes of the newborn death.

To date, "Fokus" has published several cases of babies who died over the past few years. For instance, one patient, in the 35<sup>th</sup> gestation week of her pregnancy lost one of her twin babies because of hernia. Another patient also pregnant with twins had a mishap as well, losing one of her babies because of punctured lungs.

Another mother suffered a similar situation when she lost her baby who weighed 3,900 grams, because of hyperventilation that caused punctured lungs.

The same year, the baby of a 29-year patient was infected with Klebsiella post delivery and barely survived. Furthermore, a newborn and his mother, who had a normal pregnancy without any complications, died in the hospital in Gevgelija in October last year. In that particular case, it was a mistake of the two anesthesiologists, who were suspended from work.

The Platform for Gender Equality confirms that the mortality of newborns has dramatically increased in the last five years, in almost all gynecology hospitals across the country, based on a research on this topic. According to them, shocking information indicate that newborn mortality increased within the period of implementation of the Strategy for Safe Motherhood (2010-2015) and in the period when the budget for preventive protection was reduced.

In 2011, 8 out of 1,000 babies died, whereas three years later, in 2014 the number increased to 9 out of 1,000 babies. They have not conducted researches for the past two years, but the data for 2012 are more than alarming.

*-Over the past five years, the peak of newborn mortality rate occurred in 2012, when 25 out of 1,000 live newborns died - the research states.*

An additional problem of the Gynecology Clinic is the shortage of medical staff, gynecologists, anesthesiologists and pediatricians.

Our hospital sources claim that there are only nine pediatricians at Gynecology instead of the required 15, while there are 10 anesthesiologists instead of the minimum 18. Last year only, four anesthesiologists left the clinic to work in private hospitals.

Since the affair of the increased mortality of newborns at the Gynecology Clinic broke out in public, our sources state that there is an internal investigation conducted at the Clinic to identify who took out the patients' documents, whereas part of the hospital histories are locked in order to prevent the doctors' access to them.

## **THE GYNECOLOGY DIRECTOR REMAINS SILENT ABOUT THE CASE WITH THE BABIES**

The increased mortality of newborns has provoked strong reactions in the public, and citizens and experts were shocked by the numbers indicating that almost 80 newborns died in the first six months of the year.

“Fokus” sent questions to the Director of the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje, Dr. **Marija Hadzi-Lega**, who according to our information, has already left on holiday. In the message we sent to the Director, in the evening on 25 June, we asked her if it is true that approximately 80 babies had died at the Clinic over six months, out of whom 20 in the last two weeks and what are the most common reasons for the increased mortality rate of babies. By the moment this text was published, we did not receive any answer to our questions.

However, the Gynecology Clinic held a press-conference, claiming that the published numbers are taken out of context, although they did not want to disclose the exact numbers of babies who have passed away since January. They claimed that statistical data are gathered at the end of the year or every five years to keep track of the trend.

*- Trend is established on the basis of annual, five-year or multy-year analysis and data, rather than on the basis of data gathered in only seven days, stressed Dr. Dragan Tanturovski from the Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic.*

“Fokus” newsroom did not receive an invitation for the press-conference of the Gynecology Clinic at all, although we were the first to publish the affair; however, when some of the journalists addressed Dr. Tanturovski, insisting that if he did not disclose the exact numbers, he would create the perception that he was trying to conceal something, he got aggitated and started shouting:

*-I've been a doctor for 33 years, I do not allow this kind of attitude, my professionalism always comes first. It is unacceptable for somebody of your level to humiliate me!*

Nevertheless, our sources claim that according to the Clinic rules, a report on the number of babies born and deceased is prepared twice a year.

We sent the following questions to the Minister of Health, Mr. Nikola Todorov:

1. Minister, what are you planning to do about the alarming numbers of newborn mortality at the Gynecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje?
2. Does the Ministry of Health have at its disposal any official numbers?
3. Will you resign because of these events?

By the closure of this edition of the newspaper, we did not receive any answer from the Minister, who has been occupied in the past few days with the negotiations for solving the political crisis, in the capacity of a VMRO-DMNE representative.

The opposition party SDSM also reacted to the information that 82 babies had died at the Gynecology Clinic in the past six months, of whom 20 in the last two weeks. They called upon the Minister to take moral responsibility for the frightening numbers that are shaking the hospital. Immediate reaction followed by VMRO-DPMNE, stressing that the mortality of newborns had been decreased during their mandate, while the highest rates occurred in the time when SDSM was in power.

### **THE ADVISOR OF THE FORMER PRIME MINISTER MANAGES THE SAFE MATERNITY COMMITTEE**

Since 2010, when several mothers and newborns died in only few weeks, the Ministry of Health established a Safe Motherhood Committee, tasked to improve the sanitary and hygienic conditions in the hospitals, ensure normal conditions for the delivery of babies, provide the required medical equipment and sufficient professional staff, and thus decrease the newborn mortality rate.

The Safe Motherhood Committee is managed by **Aleksandar Mitov**, health advisor in the cabinet of former Prime Minister Gruevski. In addition to him, this Committee is consisted of 15 members, among whom being the Director of the Gynecology Clinic, Hadzi-Lega, the Director of Skopje Pediatric Clinic, **Aspazija Sofijanova**, two representatives from the relevant Ministry, as well as advisors from the cabinet of the Minister of Health, Todorov. In the last few years, several doctors – Committee members have changed – new members come, as the old members leave their positions.

However, the Committee was established in the period when four mothers and three babies died in only three days. Since then, there has been no information from this institution, nor the Committee has held any press-conference about the measures that are being taken and whether any work has been done on these cases whatsoever.

According to our information, the Committee has not held a single meeting in the last five months; moreover, it has organized only three meetings since 2010 when it was established. Moreover, we found out that the right numbers of deceased babies at the Gynecology Clinic were not presented even there!

Nevertheless, it is a fact that every year, instead of decreasing, the newborn mortality rate is increasing, and therefore Macedonia has been proclaimed a “black champion” of baby death in Europe. This was confirmed in the EU Index for users of health services issued last year, in which Macedonia was ranked 27 out of 35 countries included in the study.

A report from Brussels states that the country has a long way to go in order to establish a better health care system. According to available data, 11 out of 1,000 babies in Macedonia die on a yearly basis. Albania and Serbia follow on the ranking, while Iceland, Finland and Slovenia are on best positions with two newborn deaths in 1,000 deliveries.

Instead of arguing with the journalists, the Director and the doctors from the Gynecology Clinic now have the opportunity to step out and disclose the exact numbers of babies who died in the first six months of the year. They have the best knowledge of these numbers since they have them in their reports. They are surely well aware that their functions are not worth more than a human life.

Frame:

**Instead of an answer to our question**

**THE MINISTRY IS HURLING INSULTS AS A POLITICAL PARTY HEADQUARTERS**

For more than two years, the Ministry of Health has not answered a single question by "Fokus", but it finally felt called upon to provide some answers with respect to the scandal at the Gynecology Clinic. Although we asked very specific questions and required precise information on this topic, the Ministry replied with unargued attacks, disqualifications and labeling. To assure you in the afore – stated, we hereby present the integral form of the questions and their summarized answers:

**FOKUS:** What measures will you take to prevent the increased mortality of newborns at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje, where approximately 80 babies died in the last six months, of whom 20 only in the last two weeks?

**FOKUS:** Will Minister Todorov react somehow?

**FOKUS:** Will Minister Todorov take moral responsibility for the situation at the Gynecology Clinic, taking into consideration his constant claims that the newborn mortality rate has decreased?

**FOKUS:** Does the Ministry of Health have available any official numbers?

#### **MINISTRY OF HEALTH:**

From the aspect of equipment and infrastructure, the University Clinic of Gynecology and Obstetrics meets the highest standards. Your claim implies that the problem at the Clinic is caused by the staff and their incompetence. The Ministry of Health can not agree with your completely wrong statement, which is motivated by entirely political reasons. The position of the Ministry is that highly trained professionals work at the Clinic, who are ready to handle and are already handling the most complicated cases in this segment of the medicine in the state, i.e. fight for the lives of the most serious medical patients. The citizens must know that this is nothing else but an orchestrated political campaign that you are conducting at the request of SDSM.

People know what SDSM left behind, what is the mortality rate and they know that with all the measures, new equipment, education and a completely new hospital that works in accordance with internationally accepted protocols, huge steps forward have been taken in this sphere. An indicator of that is the significantly decreased mortality of newborns – these are facts, while what you are doing is nothing else but dirty political propaganda. You can continue to lie and carry out paid political orders,

while we will continue to invest in new equipment, training and new infrastructure in the health care system.

## **NEW TESTIMONY BY THE MOTHER OF THE DECEASED INFANT IN SKOPJE**

### **Babies are treated as dolls at the Gynaecology Clinic**

**The testimony of the horror of the thirty-three year old woman from Skopje at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje for the magazine “Focus” is the latest in the series of cases of deceased infants. The baby caught sepsis, and the doctors were convincing the mother that the red spots on the body were diaper rashes. She says that she will sue the Clinic and even take the case to the Court in Strasbourg!**

**Author: Irena MULACHKA**

The former Montenegrin Minister of Health, **Miodrag Radunović**, resigned two years ago over a scandal at the general hospital in Bjelo Polje, where five babies caught a hospital-acquired infection and one of them died. In his opinion, the mistakes should have been urgently disclosed and those held accountable punished, from the janitor to the minister. However, he added that he had to be the first to leave because he was at the top of the health chain, as the weak link in the public health, hence he made an express decision to resign his seat.

Unlike Montenegro, in Macedonia, even after numerous scandals that have been shaking the public health for years, like the “Perde” scandal, doctors without Medical Faculty diplomas examining patients, deceased babies and mothers, the alarming number of cancer cases and deaths, doctors’ mistakes... the first man in Ministry of Health, **Nikola Todorov**, still has neither felt the ethnical responsibility, nor does he intend to resign. His example is followed by the directors of public health institutions, who, in addition to not resigning, resort to lawsuits and threats against journalists as their primary strategy and as a kind of pressure, in creating fear and finding a way to prevent further publication of information.

That has been the case with the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje, where, as published in “Focus” three months ago, some 80 newborns died in just six months, 20 of whom in the last two weeks. In the next few months, the “black” statistics of deceased babies continued. After the first text was published, angry doctors and mothers whose babies had died continued calling and revealing details about the hell they had gone through at the Gynaecology Clinic. In the several published texts to date, the tragic fates of many families have been revealed. Some of them are planning to file lawsuits against the Clinic, while some of them will file lawsuits against the doctors who performed the delivery. However, everyone is unanimous: “We’ve been scarred for life”.

**THE BABY CAUGHT SEPSIS, AND THE DOCTORS CLAIMED IT WAS A DIAPER RASH**

The 33-year-old **E.P.** from Skopje contacted the “Fokus” newsroom on Monday, unable to reconcile with the fact that not long ago she was buying clothes and preparing the nursery for her baby girl she wanted to name **Anja**, but who died only a few days after birth at the Gynaecology Clinic. She shared documents and medical reports from the entire pregnancy which was followed in one of the private hospitals, right until her delivery at the Gynaecology Clinic. The unfortunate mother also shared photos of her newborn baby, who caught an infection with a rash all over her body, only a few days after her delivery at the Clinic. The enraged mother told us her entire ordeal at the Gynaecology Clinic, the bad attitude of the doctors and medical staff and the disastrous hygiene conditions in the hospital. As she emphasized, her whole pregnancy was monitored in one of the private hospitals, until the moment of preterm delivery in the 31-gestation week. She then went to the Gynaecology Clinic where “hell started and I lost my child”. She went to the Clinic on 5 September and stayed at Intensive Care until 13 September, the day she gave a birth.

*-In all this time I was four centimetres open and I had antibiotics, lencacin and magnesium administered intravenously. On 13 September at 7:30 in the evening, I got labour pains, which lasted all night, and the delivery started on 13 September at 9.25 in the morning. What is worse is that there was no paediatrician during the delivery, even though this is obligatory, especially if you consider the fact that I was giving birth a few weeks earlier than the due date – claims the 33-year-old E. P.*

The baby had a low birth weight and it was placed in an incubator, but she could breathe on her own and she was not given oxygen. They gave her some antibiotics immediately, claiming she had been infected by the mother. But, the claims of the doctors at the Gynaecology Clinic go against the documents which we have received. The medical documentation containing the laboratory diagnosis of Microbiology shows that there are no infections in the smears from the microbiological examinations that the mother provided just a few weeks before delivery. This means that the newborn could not be infected by her.

*-In order to save themselves, the easiest way was to blame me. Thus, they began making up stories that the baby had been infected by me, which is not true, and this could be seen in the documents. The baby was born healthy, it was only smaller and that is why they put her in the incubator – adds the enraged revolted.*

She claims that her baby caught sepsis while it was in the incubator at the Clinic, and this was confirmed by several doctors from the Clinic, and by those who saw the photo of the newborn with red spots all over the body. The parents were informed about what had happened with the baby and the changes that occurred on its body on 15 September, just two days after the delivery. Then, a new story was concocted:



*-It is not something to worry about. It is just a reaction from the diapers. Don't be afraid, we are soaking the diapers with physiological saline. It will go away. That is how they soothed me and lied to me all the time at the Clinic – says the 33-year-old E.P.*

On 16 September, the Clinic gave them even more disturbing news. She and her husband were informed that the baby had a bleeding in the stomach, and that they did a scan of head on the same day and there was no bleeding there. Two days later, on 18 September, they were told that the baby's condition is stable, neither worse, nor better.

*-They convinced us not to be afraid and that they wanted to give us a healthy baby to take home, and told us not to worry too much because we already had one child at home. This meant that whatever happened with the baby, we should not be disturbed – says the mother of the deceased infant.*

The baby died on 19 September at 4.50 a.m., and the parents were informed three hours later, at 7.46 a.m. The body of the deceased infant was immediately sent for an autopsy at the Institute of Pathology, and depending on the findings, the family would decide what future steps to take.

*-I will go to the end, my baby died because of them. I will sue them and, if necessary, I will take this case to Strasbourg! – says our outraged interviewee.*

## **MORTALITY INCREASES, THE AUTHORITIES ARE SILENT**

This has not been the only case of a deceased infant in September, at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje. Two weeks ago, there was another case of infant death after natural delivery. The patient **C.N.**, with an "in vitro" pregnancy, according to the information, gave birth naturally in 36-th gestation week. The baby was born with a low birth weight of 1,620 grams. Three days later, on 24 September, the baby died and its body was sent for an autopsy at the Institute of Pathology.

According to the doctors we talked to, the exact reasons behind the death of the infant, as well as the mother's situation during her pregnancy, i.e. whether she had any other health problems, are still unknown. The answers to all these questions should have been provided through the pathology findings, which, according to the practice, are usually ready in two months.

So far, "Fokus" has revealed more than a dozen of heartbreaking cases of deceased babies at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje, and the main reasons for the increased deaths, according to doctors are: hospital-acquired infections that babies have contracted while staying there, premature births, and doctors' mistakes. There were also several cases of patients who were placed in separate isolated rooms two months ago, because they contracted hospital-acquired infections and were operated several times.

*-Things that happen at the Clinic are terrible. We have gynaecologists, but we don't have enough anaesthesiologists and paediatricians, who are necessary to get the work done properly. And then we wonder why there are so many deaths, why do mothers and babies die. What is most unfortunate in spite of everything that happens is that nobody takes responsibility about anything. We act like we are working with dolls, and not children – says the doctor, who works at the Clinic, but asked to stay anonymous, in fear of losing their job.*

Despite all the cases that “Focus” has revealed so far about the events at the Gynaecology Clinic, the Director **Marija Hadzi-Lega** is not revealing the figures about the deceased infants in 2016. She sent “Focus” a table showing the number of deceased infants by 2015. According to the statistics, 99 babies died at the Clinic last year, and the year before that, in 2014, 140 infants died. The situation in the other years is almost the same. In 2013, the number of deceased babies was 137, while in 2012 that number was 125 babies.

“Focus” again tried to get in touch with the director Hadzi-Lega, after already sending several text messages on her mobile phone, asking her to explain the increase in the number of deceased infants, the reasons no actions have been taken to reduce the alarming numbers and the reasons behind her constant ignoring of questions. Until the closing of this edition of our weekly, we didn't get any answers.

The last time the Director of the Gynaecology Clinic communicated with “Focus” was two years ago, in May 2014, when we also asked for data on the increase of infant mortality. Then she informed us that the data are being processed and that she would get back to us when they are ready. Since then, she has neither responded to our phone calls, nor has she answered our text messages.

We have also sent several questions to the Ministry of Health, and they have also been silent for several months. It is crucial for the competent institutions to react and identify the reasons behind the alarming numbers of deceased babies at the Gynaecology Clinic. After all, we are talking about human lives, not dolls. The public has the right to know, especially the families that have lost their babies.

#### **Frame:**

#### **“SGS” IS NOT IN CHARGE OF THE SECURITY IN THE CLINIC ANYMORE**

For more than a month, the Skopje Gynaecology Clinic has been without the private security of the “Security Group Service” (SGS), contracted to secure the facility, after their signed contract expired on 1 September. Exactly one year after the information on the frequent attacks on doctors and medical staff was reported, the Clinic decided to protect the facility, therefore assigning a 24-hour security.

It is not yet clear whether there would be a new tender for private security and which company would secure the facility in the meantime. What we known at the moment is that two paramedics have been assigned to protect the staff at the Gynaecology, one of them standing at the front door, and the other at the operating theatres.

According to the data of the Public Procurement Bureau, the security for the Gynaecology Clinic had been provided for one year by “SGS”, a company known to the public as close to the former head of the Administration for Security and Counter-Intelligence, **Sasho Mijalkov**, which was also proved by the “bombs” released by the

leader of SDSM, **Zoran Zaev**. The contract with “SGS” was concluded on 7 August, last year, in the amount of EUR 76,747, and the lowest price was the main criterion for selection of this firm, although it gave the only bid on the tender.

More than a year ago, the opposition party SDSM announced a “bomb” in which we could hear a claim that Mijalkov is behind the famous company “SGS”. At the press-conference in Kavadarci, SDSM revealed several audio recordings, claiming to prove that Mijalkov was the owner of the security agency, which according to them, received millions from the government of **Nikola Gruevski**. Additionally, another released conversation was between Mijalkov and **Dejan Mitrevski-Urko**, the former bodyguard of then Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who withdrew from the security agency “Lupus” after “SGS” began working at full steam.

Also, more than a year ago, SDSM came out with astonishing data about tens of millions of euros transferred to the account of “SGS” for obtaining state tenders for security.

**Frame:**

#### **“PAP” TESTS AT THE GYNAECOLOGY ARE INACCURATE?**

A few days ago, the Association of Gynaecologists came up with the information that the results of the PAP tests performed at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic were inaccurate, handed over without a signature and a seal, and the second test done elsewhere usually gives different data. This was confirmed by doctor **Dushko Filipovski**, President of the Association. He doubts the accuracy of the results and for these reasons he had already expressed his concerns twice to the Ministry of Health.

Within just a few hours, the accusation was denied by the Gynaecology Clinic, arguing that this was an unjustified slander of the Clinic in order to destroy the reputation of this institution.

## ESCALATING SCANDAL AT THE SKOPJE GYNAECOLOGY CLINIC

### Three patients contracted hospital infections

Two months after “Fokus” published information about some 80 babies who died in a period of six months at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje, 20 of whom only in two weeks, this time, there have been several cases of female patient mortality. One of them had a common ovarian cyst, for which she had an unnecessary hysterectomy, which led to the worsening of her condition and her death on 17 August. There are three other female patients at the Clinic who have been hospitalized for almost two-three months, due to hospital-acquired infections during surgery. They are kept in isolated rooms so as to avoid spreading of the infection to other female patients and babies!

**Author: Irena MULACKA**

More than a month ago, “Fokus” published a series of articles about the scandal at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic in Skopje, where more than 80 babies died in six months, 20 of whom in only two weeks. The incompetence on the part of some doctors, lack of staff, hospital-acquired infections, unhygienic conditions, as well as the fact that almost all critical delivery cases from other hospitals in the country are brought at the Skopje Clinic, are among the main reasons behind the increased infant mortality we wrote about. Right after the scandal was revealed, the Gynaecology Clinic expressly reacted and finally revealed the numbers of deceased babies, but the disclosed figures referred only to the period until the end of 2015, claiming that the published data was incorrect. Still, the articles published in “Fokus” tackled cases of babies who died in the first six months of 2016, for which the Clinic did not provide any information.

Our newsroom immediately received lawsuit threats by the Clinic, and according to our information, the employees who, in the opinion of the management, allegedly took the documents from the Clinic, were also threatened with dismissal from work.

Two months since, we haven't received any numbers about the infant mortality in 2016, but according to our latest information the numbers have continued to grow alarmingly in the recent period. Still, these are not the only death cases at the Clinic, which presents itself as a “reputable institution that has existed for seven decades with a team of experts and professionals”, because apart from the babies, female patients also die at the Gynaecology Clinic.

That is the reason we decided to publicly share our new insights and data with our readers. We also decided to search for answers to the questions – why the competent institutions and the Minister of Health, **Nikola Todorov**, who at the time pressed charges against an unknown perpetrator, did not react in this case, to check what exactly was going on at the Gynaecology Clinic? Why pro-government media advertisements motivate families to have a third child? What should the mothers do when they lose their babies and there is no place to address this issue? Is human life in Macedonia that worthless?

## FROM AN ORDINARY CYST TO HYSTERECTOMY AND ULTIMATELY DEATH

According to the information available to “Fokus”, in the past few weeks, there have been some new cases of deceased babies, but also of mothers who deceased from excessive bleeding caused from poorly performed surgeries at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje.

As a common practice, every day, the Medical Board of the Clinic holds a meeting, where more than 70 gynaecologists, anaesthesiologists and paediatricians regularly report about the cases that happened during the night shift, the number of babies that were born the night before, the health condition of the babies and the mothers, i.e. the number of patients in critical condition. Our hospital sources claim that in the last period, since revealing the alarming data to the public, this tradition has stopped. Now, the information with respect to the new cases of infant mortality is no longer shared with the Medical Board.

“Fokus” has received new documents that explain the entire ordeal of the 32-year-old patient **E.T.** who died at the Gynaecology Clinic on 17 August 2017. According to the documents and the doctors’ statements, the patient had chronic myeloid leukaemia that she treated with the Gleevec medication, but she came at the Clinic for something completely different – a simple cyst removal surgery. Before she was taken to a surgery, a Medical Consilium, consisting of one gynaecologist and two radiologists was established so as to assess her health condition.

According to our information, the first Medical Consilium did not take into consideration that the patient had been suffering with leukaemia. The documents indicate that a hysterectomy was performed on 9 August, although there was no need of that kind of surgery at all. The patient had extensive bleeding. Was the assessment of the Medical Consilium wrong, when they decided to perform surgery on the patient, thus causing her health condition to worsen?

In the meantime, two more Medical Consiliums, both consisted of three professors, were held. They alarmed that the patient must urgently go through another surgery, since she was in a critical and life-threatening condition. The last Medical Consilium was held on 15 August 2016, at 14.00 hrs.

*-Taking into consideration that the patient’s condition was worsening by the time the Medical Consillium was held, her abdomen was bloated, CT of abdomen and small pelvis indicated signs of ileus and hydroaeric levels, the Medical Consillium urgently decided to make a revision in the presence of an abdominal surgeon. Considering the general bad condition caused by the initial illness, the family of the patient was called so as to explain the risks from the surgery procedure and acquire their approval to perform an operation in the patient’s interest – states the expert opinion of the three doctors.*

The patient had a second surgery on 16 August, and the next day she passed away. Part of the doctors at the Clinic claim the surgeon who performed the surgery did it incompetently and unprofessionally, not respecting the protocols. Our newsroom

knows the names of the doctors who were part of the Medical Consillium, as well as the name of the surgeon who operated, but we decided not to reveal their identity.

In less than a few days, on 25 August, there was another case of a deceased female patient/mother at the Clinic. According to our sources, the 23-year-old patient from Bitola was received in the 33-gastation week of the pregnancy. She delivered the baby with C-section, but she previously had health problems. Her leg was amputated two months ago. The patient died, but the baby is alive and at the moment it is at the Gynaecology Clinic. This was not a case of a doctors' mistake, but the patient was received in terrible health condition.

## **PATIENTS IN ISOLATED ROOMS DUE TO INFECTIONS**

After "Fokus" published the texts about the scandal at the Gynaecology Clinic in Skopje, the Clinic expressly denied the accusations in a statement praising their expertise, professional staff and immaculate hygiene. But, the latest information we have contradicts the "ideal" picture and once again sounds the alarm about the horrible situation at the Clinic, caused both by the incompetence on the part of the staff and the unhygienic conditions and bacteria.

A proof of that are the three female patients, who have been hospitalized at the Gynaecology Clinic for more than two months due to hospital-acquired infections contracted while being treated there. All three were placed in isolated rooms. They do not have any contact with other female patients, new mothers and babies, in order to prevent the infection from spreading. Our newsroom knows the first names and last names of the patients and their medical histories. One of them is the 36-year-old **S. M.** from Kavadarci with medical history no.8747, who has been at the Clinic for almost two months. She had adenocarcinoma, and on 25 July she had a surgery, including radical hysterectomy (uterus removal). But, instead of ending her health problems there, this is where her ordeal at the Clinic started. At the time she was hospitalized at the Clinic, she contracted a hospital-acquired infection confirmed by the positive smear. The woman had an infected festering wound, which required another operation that was carried out on 4 August. The patient was sent home on Tuesday, after spending 25 days in the hospital.

She is not the only patient who faced health problem like these. The second patient, who is still hospitalized at the Clinic, is the 28-year-old **E. A.** from Vinica, who also had two surgeries. According to her medical history no. 9213, she had a C-section on July 4 2016, but in the meantime she also contracted hospital-acquired infection, that required another surgery. After almost two months spent at the Clinic due to the infected wound, the 28-year-old patient had a revision surgery of the festering wound on 26 August, Friday, in the presence of a plastic surgeon.

However, the problems of the Gynaecology Clinic did not end here. The third patient, who had even three surgeries in a period of two months, is the 70-year-old **Z. H.** from Skopje, whose uterus was removed. Since then, her new health problems began. While she was hospitalized at the Clinic, she caught an infection, her wound opened and she had another surgery on 18 July, this year. One month later, on 29 August, Monday, the patient had another surgery. Thus, she has been hospitalized for more than two months in an isolated room at the Clinic.

“Fokus” has been calling the Director of the Gynaecology Clinic, Dr. **Marija Hadzi-Lega** to get answers and give us her opinion and explanation of the situation, but she has been ignoring us all this time. As usual, only a day after publishing the latest issue of the magazine, she promptly sent a denial in which she neither answered any of our questions, nor did she deny the revealed cases. She rather decided to praise the Clinic and the expert team that works there and threatened our newsroom with a lawsuit.

The Minister of Health, Todorov, has also been ignoring our questions on this topic for a while now, although we have asked him several times and we insisted on his answers to the questions about the actions regarding the increased mortality of babies at the state Clinic, considering the fact that he had been constantly stressing that there had been a decrease in the number of deceased babies and that the Macedonian health systems is one of the best in Europe.

### **HADZI-LEGA IS THE BOSS AT THE GYNAECOLOGY CLINIC**

Dr. Marija Hadzi-Lega has been the Director of the Gynaecology Clinic for four years, since 2012, when she came to the position only a few months after she assisted the spouse of the Minister of Health, Todorov, to deliver their second baby. She has been the Acting Director for the entire time since 2012, although the legal timeframe for acting directors is only six months. The Gynaecology Clinic is the only Clinic that does not have a financial director to manage the finances, although, according to the Law, all the clinics are obliged to be managed by two directors with a joint signature, one dealing with health issues and the other one with finances. The Clinic had its last financial director in the period 2009-2012, when that position was filled by **Elisej Cicimov**, who currently works at the Employment Agency.

Could the Director of the Gynaecology Clinic be replaced was the question raised during last week, following the announcements made two weeks ago, in one of the daily newspapers, for two new directors at the Skopje clinics, one referring to the Gynaecology Clinic. The open call lasted seven days, by this Monday. Time will show whether Hadzi-Lega will keep her position or be replaced, considering the information that several of her colleagues applied for the position.

During her “rule”, a series of scandals emerged at the Clinic, and one of them was related to the equipping of the Director’s office with furniture from the Italian company “Casa Italia”, amounting EUR 20,000. Her entire office is painted green and furnished with white furniture. All these data are public and were published at the website of the Public Procurement Bureau. Despite the fact that the Gynaecology Clinic is located in a new building and has new available equipment, it is also one of the clinics with the highest budget, which in 2015 amounted to EUR 6.5 million, while in 2016 the budget was slightly increased reaching approximately EUR 7 million.

Regardless of how much the competent institutions wanted to portray the “pretty” picture of the public health care system, the frightening information came to the surface. The medical histories witnessing the number of patients and babies who died throughout the years will remain in the archives of the Gynaecology Clinic, although a big problem is the fact that all critical cases from across the country and private hospitals - end up there. The Clinic has a director who can publicly speak

about the problems, instead of arguing with the media. Still, we are talking about human lives, which are obviously insignificant in Macedonia!

**Frame:**

**DURING THE FLOODS, THE BASEMENT OF THE CLINIC WAS UNDER WATER**

The storm that hit Skopje on 6 August 2016, flooded the basement of the Gynaecology Clinic, where blood analyses of patients are performed. According to our information, even when everything was flooded, the medical personnel continued to perform the examinations until the inspection knocked on their door and banned them to continue performing their work. They were then forced to manage the situation and took the blood analyses to other clinics.



## **A DOCTOR FROM GYNECOLOGY THREATENS A MOTHER**

**If this gets published in the “Fokus”, it will seal the fate of your baby!**

**The scandal at the Gynecology Clinic is spreading. “Fokus” has the names of new ten patients, who have gone through hell at the Clinic in the last five months as a consequence of poorly performed surgeries and contracted hospital acquired infections. Abdominal surgeons from Skopje Digestive Clinic had to intervene at the last moment to save the lives of patients and fix doctors’ mistakes.**

**Author: Irena MULACHKA**

A week ago, the State Statistical Office came up with striking information that in the third quarter of the year, 90 babies died, twice as much compared with the same period last year, when there were 39 dead infants. According to their data, the “black” balance of deceased infants is alarmingly growing, and so far 206 babies have died in only nine months, which is not the total number for the entire year, given that the year has not yet ended and there are no official data for the last three months.

These statistics ranked Macedonia first for baby mortality in Europe. The rate of infant mortality immediately after birth in our country is 14.3 percent, which is three fold the European average, which is 5.2 percent.

More than five months ago, “Fokus” opened the topic in which we publicly revealed data that in the first six months of 2016 more than 80 newborns died at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje. Even more alarming was the fact that in that period 20 babies died in only two weeks. Although the Clinic is the main centre at state level where all complicated cases end up, which is partly the reason for these high numbers, scandals continue to shake the Clinic after all this time and the menacing information for new deceased babies and mothers, wrong diagnoses and poorly conducted operations do not cease to appear.

## **ABDOMINAL SURGEONS FIX DOCTORS’ MISTAKES AT GYNECOLOGY**

The patients who have cervical cancer, ovarian cancer, cysts... etc, who urgently need surgical interventions end up at the Clinic every day. The Clinic constantly praises their professional work, professional staff and perfect hygiene, but our latest information is contrary to “the ideal” picture and alarms yet again about the terrible cases at the hospital due to the incompetence on the part of some staff , the unhygienic conditions and the bacteria present there.

What is even scarier, the Minister of Health **Nikola Todorov** has been silent for months about this issue, ignoring our questions and, quite expectedly, continuing the election campaign. At the end, it is all about patients, right?!

For over two months, there have been no reports at the medical board meetings at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje, which are attended by over 70 gynecologists,

pediatricians and anesthesiologists regarding the events that take place during the night shifts, the number of babies in critical condition, whether some of them died, whether there are complicated surgical cases and their number, as this has become a tradition for years at the Clinic.

“Fokus” has the names and hospital histories of ten new patients who have gone through hell at the Clinic in the past five months because of the poorly performed operations and hospital acquired infections, which was the reason, as doctors claim, for abdominal surgeons from the Digestive Clinic in Skopje to intervene in the last moment to fix the doctors’ mistakes and save the patients’ lives. Our newsroom has the names of the doctors who carried out the interventions, but we decided not to reveal their identity. According to our data, one of the patients, who endured an ordeal at the Gynecology Clinic, is 49-year -old **T. S.** with history number 8189, who was to undergo a laparoscopic hysterectomy (uterine removal) on 29 June this year. Our sources claim that during the intervention, her colon was punctured, and an abdominal surgeon was summoned from his job to intervene promptly to fix the mistake made by the doctor who performed the surgery.

She is not the only one who has faced such problems. Second on the list is 28-year-old patient **A. E.**, who gave birth with a caesarean section at the Clinic on 4 July this year. According to the medical history with number 9213, a revision surgery was performed on the patient on 26 August, when an abdominal surgeon had to intervene, after her having stayed in the hospital for a month and a half.

In addition to these two patients, in order to fix the mistakes of their colleagues, abdominal surgeons from the Digestive Surgery Clinic intervened on 73-year-old **V. P.** with a hospital history number 11462, who was operated from adenocarcinoma (uterine cancer). According to our data, the patient’s wound opened after 10 days and two more interventions had to be performed. However, instead of reaching the end of her health problems, her agonies at the Clinic continued. During her stay in the hospital, she contracted a hospital acquired infection, which was confirmed by the positive smears. The woman had a festering wound with an infection and she had to be placed in an isolated room for more than a month.

A patient who was also hospitalized at the Clinic was 64-year-old **J. P.**, who was operated on for an ovarian tumor and during the poorly performed intervention her colon was injured; in this case, as in the previous, an abdominal surgeon had to intervene yet again. According to her hospital history number 10787, while she was recovering at the Clinic, she contracted a hospital acquired infection and she was placed in an isolated room. In addition to these two patients, there were two more patients at the Clinic, who contracted hospital acquired infections after surgery, which was confirmed by their positive smears. These are 45-year-old **J. S.** with medical history number 13430 and 58-year-old **B. Z.** whose history number is 10036. They were both placed in isolated rooms to prevent spreading of the infection to the other patients placed in the same ward.

However, the problems at the Gynecology Clinic did not end here. At the beginning of this month, on 1 November, 39-year-old **M. N.** was hospitalized, for having an ovarian tumor, according to our information. Her condition began to rapidly deteriorate and on the second day she was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit. Although she was to be operated on in two days, on 3 November the patient died.

The list of badly performed surgical interventions also includes patient **M. S.**, who according to hospital history number 8747, was operated on 25 July this year. However, a complication occurred and only two weeks later, on 4 August, a revision surgery was performed by an abdominal surgeon.

What is specific for these surgeries is that most of them were performed by a doctor-specialist, whose name has been known to the public for years, but "Fokus" decided not to reveal his identity. He is notorious for being involved in many scandals in the last ten years at the Clinic, ranging from poorly performed surgical interventions to business trips at the Clinic's expense.

"Fokus" also contacted several abdominal surgeons from the Digestive Surgery Clinic in Skopje to get an explanation as to the most frequent reasons they are called upon to intervene at the Gynecology Clinic. According to them, it is mostly a wrong diagnosis, colon injury during surgery, a poor working technique, inappropriate assessment... According to the agreements in place, the Gynecology Clinic is obligated to pay the abdominal surgeons for such interventions, hence for the last two or three months, Gynecology owes almost 280 thousand Denars to the Abdominal Surgery Clinic, out of which 33 percent goes to the Clinic and 67 per cent to the doctors who perform the interventions.

"Fokus" also sent several questions to the official e-mail of the Clinic trying to get an answer to the question how many abdominal surgeons have intervened on patients at the Gynecology Clinic and how much money they owe to the abdominal surgery clinic? However, until the closure of this issue of the magazine, we did not receive any answer.

## **A DOCTOR MAKES A SCANDALOUS THREAT**

Two weeks ago, 31-year-old mother **Violeta Mitrevska** from Skopje, called "Fokus" newsroom, and explained us in detail the entire drama she had to endure at the Gynecology Clinic, where her newborn was in an incubator for over a month.

According to her claim, she had high blood pressure, rising to 190/100, in the 7<sup>th</sup> month of her pregnancy, which was dangerous both for her and for her baby. Mitrevska adds that they did not want to accept her at the Clinic, despite the hypertensive shocks, which could cause preterm delivery, as it eventually indeed happened.

Since her condition started to deteriorate, in the morning of 13 October, at 9 in the morning she was taken to the operating room for a C-section delivery, but since there was no free incubator for the baby at that moment, the delivery was postponed for a few hours.

*-There are no words to explain how frightened I was. They were trying to convince me that I should carry the baby for 10 more days. My condition got worse and they reacted as if it was about a doll and everything was normal. When I entered the operating room, first there was no incubator, and after a few hours when they finally found an incubator, there was no free operating room. All that lasted by 13.30, when*

*I was finally operated on. Both me and my boy ended up with electro- shocks and we literally fought for our lives– Mitrevska claims.*

According to the documents we have at our disposal, she gave birth to a baby boy in the 31<sup>st</sup> gestation week, who weighed 1,520 grams and was 39 cm long. According to Clinic protocols, the baby had to stay in the incubator until he gained proper weight. This was when their problems actually began. The documents state that the mother was accepted at the Clinic on 8 October and she was released to go home only three days after the delivery, on 16 October, while the baby stayed at the Clinic for another whole month.

*- As a mother, I did not have any access to my baby. I was allowed to go there only once a week, in order to hand express breast milk for my baby. His condition deteriorated on several occasions, he lost weight, contracted some infection, and I had no idea whatsoever as to what was happening to him. They did not give me any information by the phone, the security “SGS” did not let me at the entrance. I was thrown out with shouting and kicks from the hospital. They could have killed a healthy and sound baby there... Scary and sad... As if we were living in Tansania and not Macedonia – the 31-year-old mother says.*

As time passed by, exasperated by the attitude of both doctors and medical staff at the Clinic, on one occasion the mother told one of the doctors that if they continued with same bad attitude and treatment of the baby, she would reveal all the information in “Fokus” weekly. She was astonished by the doctor’s reply:

*-If you publish anything in “Fokus” it will seal the fate of your baby! The doctor addressed me with these very words, the doctor who has taken the Hippocratic Oath. The only thing they care about is that nothing goes out in a newspaper, and they do not care about the babies at all - Mitrevska claims.*

For the entire time the baby was at the Clinic, our newsroom was in contact with the family, but they did not dare to say anything in public, scared of the doctor’s threat. According to the hospital discharge form, the baby was sent home on 15 November this year, and it was only then that his parents decided to share the trauma they went through at the Clinic with the public. They add that after the baby was finally released, he had prolonged jaundice, was starved and did not have a swallowing reflex.

## **THE FIGURES OF DECEASED BABIES ARE A “STATE SECRET”**

After numerous questions sent to the Director of the Gynecology Clinic, **Marija Hadzi-Lega**, regarding the increased baby mortality, hospital acquired infections, patients who have died of sepsis – questions for which we had not been able to get any answers for months, we finally met the Director face-to-face at the press-conference on 17 November, on the occasion of the World Prematurity Day. On our question, why a pediatrician was not present during the delivery of the preterm baby who later died, Hadzi-Lega answered that according to protocols, presence is obligatory and all the parents who have any complaints should feel free to turn to her.

- *Every remark can be reported and we can take action immediately* – Hadzi-Lega pointed out.

However, when we asked her how many babies died at the Clinic in the last several months, she briefly answered that she could not speculate with figures and that the exact statistics will be known at the end of the year.

-*With regard to figures, I would not like to speculate. We usually sum up the results at the end of the year, but I can say that as years pass by we have a decrease in the mortality rate at the Clinic. Yet, it is a fact that the Clinic has the highest mortality rate, which is to be expected, since all critical cases are brought here. The highest mortality is registered before the 28<sup>th</sup> gestation week* – Dr. Hadzi-Lega emphasized.

She did not know why parents who believed that their babies got sepsis did not react to the hospital, stating that they would have investigated what had happened.

We also managed to discuss with the Director the poor employee relations, the doctors' mistakes, the wrong diagnoses and the incompetence of some doctors at the Clinic. She denied the scandalous occurrences at the Clinic, claiming that everything was functioning in a professional and competent manner.

There have been no reactions to this issue from the Ministry of Health and Minister Nikola Todorov for several months. Five years ago, when he took office, he reacted in several cases when a patient died due to a doctor's mistake and even pressed charges against unknown perpetrator.

However, the Minister of Health has been now silent for over five months, although the figures of deceased newborns are increasing on a daily basis.

Todorov has never felt an urge to check what is happening at the Gynecology Clinic, why so many babies die there, why are parents constantly blaming the clinic for bad treatment and incompetence on the part of some doctors and medical staff?

The management at the Gynecology Clinic may claim that everything is picture-perfect, but the real situation indicates precisely the opposite. The anger and agonies of parents come up to the surface every day, seeking help in the media, hoping that their pain will at least get eased if the truth is revealed. As things stand, besides running the pre-election campaign, taking pictures and appealing for votes, the Minister should turn around and see that he should help those that he is appealing to right now!

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## **INSTEAD AT UROLOGY, SHE ENDED UP AT GYNECOLOGY**

The fact that poor assessments are made at the Gynecology Clinic in Skopje is also proved by the case of 71-year-old **M. V.** with medical history no. 13124, who, instead of having surgery at the Clinic of Urology, ended up at the Gynecology Clinic. According to her hospital history, the patient should have had a bladder tumor operated, but at the last moment the doctors realized that she was sent to the wrong

place for the intervention. As soon as the urologist arrived, she was instantly transferred to the Clinic of Urology.

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### **THE GYNEACOLOGISTS LEAST PAID FOR THEIR DUTY SHIFTS**

The doctors from the Gynecology Clinic sent a letter to the Management Board, stating that they are the least paid for their duty shifts, namely 1 300-1 400 Denars per duty shift, while at the other clinics these shifts are normally paid between 3 000 and 4 000 Denars. They demand to be paid the same as all their other colleagues, considering the extensive workload they have.