

Türkiye rocked by newborn care scandal

A huge criminal investigation is under way following accusations that fraud and substandard care have resulted in the deaths of several babies. Kaya Genc reports from Istanbul.



Between Oct 18 and 21, 2024, Türkiye's Health Ministry officials visited seven private hospitals in Istanbul. The officials transferred patients to public hospitals in the area, pulled down their signs, and shut the hospitals down. Two other hospitals were similarly shuttered soon after. On Oct 19, locals threw stones at one hospital's windows and doors. The raids came on the heels of arguably the biggest health scandal in Turkish history, which the press has called "the Newborn Gang" and concerns a number of doctors and health personnel charged with fraud and embezzlement, as well as medical negligence and substandard care.

The country's Justice Minister, Yılmaz Tunç, announced that 22 of the 47 suspects named in an ongoing investigation had been arrested. The indictment charges 21 suspects with responsibility for the deaths of at least 12 babies. The charges include establishing a criminal organisation, negligent acts of committing intentional homicide, aggravated fraud, and bribery. The indictment listed ten babies who died as "victims" who did not receive the necessary treatment and care and on whom "passive euthanasia" was applied, with the right to life of several babies "taken away from them". Surgeons, nurses, call centre workers for the ambulance service 112, and drivers are among the accused. If convicted, the 47 suspects face up to 17 000 years in jail.

The scandal began to emerge on March 27, 2023, when the Presidential Communication Centre (CİMER) received an anonymous tip that accused two intensive care doctors of conspiring to use private hospital neonatal intensive care units for financial gain. The doctors, according to the complaint, "made millions of

liras, for years, by classifying patients needing primary care as in need of tertiary intensive care units, and by bribing the state ambulance and control center 112" to have babies taken to a set of private hospitals where they would go on to die "under poor conditions". The complaint named six hospitals in Istanbul "alongside numerous others that didn't have doctors on duty at night. Many babies died inhumanely due to medically inappropriate conditions." If those hospitals were to be "suddenly raided and inspected", the complainant said, "you'd understand much better what I mean. These dead babies could be your babies." The Financial Crimes Department in Istanbul launched an investigation in May, 2023.

The indictment and testimonies claim that the defendants withheld treatment and gave false statements to parents in order to prolong hospital stays as long as possible to embezzle more money from the social security system. According to the indictment, the long-term stays and several cases of patient mistreatment resulted in the babies' deaths. In one incident, detailed in the prosecutor's indictment, a surgeon and nurse are charged with medical malpractice in the death of a baby through inserting a wrong tube in the intensive care unit, and conspiring to hide x-ray reports to hide culpability. Another incident cited in the indictment concerns the delayed treatment of a baby with a severe eye infection, resulting in blindness, and the attempt to tamper with official records to hide culpability.

On April 26, 2024, following investigations by the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in Istanbul, the Provincial Health Directorate of Istanbul, the Health Directorate, and

the Social Security Institution, police raided houses of suspects and detained 47 people, 22 of whom were arrested the next day. In May, the Health Ministry suspended the activities of Medilife Beylikdüzü Hospital in Istanbul. In a statement, Medilife denied the allegations. "The infant deaths mentioned in the indictment did not occur in our hospital, and this information can be verified with the data of the Ministry of Health", the hospital said. "The healthcare personnel who disregarded the lives of babies have not worked in our hospital since the day we were founded. In the face of the news about us, our hospital was closed by an administrative decision without granting any right of defense."

Medilife said, "Our neonatal intensive care unit has never been rented to third parties for profit." However, the hospital did accept that it has received "intensive care consultation services" from a neonatologist who worked for the hospital from March, 2023 to April, 2024 and is currently being arrested in the case. Züleyha Sevim, a spokesperson on behalf of Medilife Beylikdüzü Hospital employees, said 650 people have become unemployed after the hospital's closure. "This hospital was like our home; most of us have worked here for 10 years, and some have worked for over 20 years. None of the inhumane incidents reported in the media took place in this institution", she said. "We have been employees of this institution for many years, and believe me, we are all witnesses to the innocence of this hospital."

One of the hospitals in the indictment, Avcılar Hospital, is owned by Mehmet Müezzinoğlu, who served as Minister of Health from 2013 to 2016. In a statement, Avcılar

Hospital said it had “full faith that the innocence of our hospital and its members regarding the alleged issues will ultimately be revealed as a result of the process”. The hospital said, “Whoever does wrong against human health must pay the price. We have full confidence in Turkish justice.” Müezzinoğlu said he regrets that his hospital has used the services of the accused surgeons and that his hospital did not profit from its intensive care unit. “We just rented it out. In other words, no matter how many patients we had in intensive care, our income did not increase. Our intensive care unit is already operating at a loss of at least 20 percent.”

In June, 2024, the public prosecutor asked the Health Ministry to see if there was a “casual link between infant deaths and the actions of the suspects”. The expert opinion report compiled by the Health Ministry Inspectorate concluded that 90% of newborn babies left under the supervision of a nurse in these instances “had their right to life taken away from them”. The Ministry’s scientific committee ruled that there was a link between the infant deaths and the group’s attempts to defraud the Social Security Institution, the governing authority of the Turkish social security system, concluding suspects were responsible for the infant deaths. These findings led inspectors to recommend closing the hospitals.

The investigation has led to soul searching among Türkiye’s health community, and pleas for a broader interrogation of Türkiye’s health system. A set of laws introduced in the mid-2000s had enabled private hospitals to charge the public health service for caring for patients, including in intensive care units—it is these laws that the health personnel involved in the current case have allegedly exploited.

The legal changes were introduced in 2006, when a new law accepted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly classified all hospitals,

public and private, as “contracted health service providers” for the Social Security Institution, paving the way for private hospitals to use funds of the social security system. Patients could now receive all kinds of health services in private hospitals, including outpatient examinations, laboratory tests, surgeries, births, and inpatient treatment, and hospitals could charge the social security system and the patients themselves fees for those additional services. The additional fees they could charge patients were limited to 30% in 2009 and increased to 200% in 2013. However, exceeding this limit resulted in only a fine for the offending hospitals.

These factors have led to competition among private hospitals to place the maximum number of babies in intensive care units to receive Social Security Institution payments. According to Health Ministry statistics, private hospitals increasingly dominate the newborn bed sector, receive large payments from the Social Security Institution, and charge patients for their services. The number of newborn intensive care beds in private hospitals has increased from 3434 in 2012 to 7330 in 2022 (the number of newborn intensive care beds rose in public hospitals from 3114 to 4738 over the same period). Some private hospitals have outsourced the operations of their intensive care units to individual surgeons who establish companies and employ personnel who oversee the intensive care facilities of these hospitals. The arrested surgeons in the case had taken such an approach.

Two of the accused nurses accepted they have tried to manipulate the health system to receive payments from the Social Security Institution, but refused the charge of premeditated murder during the first week of hearings of the case that began on Nov 18 in Bakırköy High Criminal Court in Istanbul, and denied membership of a criminal organisation. The surgeon charged with leading the organisation

said he did not “discover” anything new, but only took advantage of the current health system, denied responsibility in infant deaths, and added that thousands have lost their jobs because of the investigation. An ambulance driver who is among the accused claimed their scheme of bringing newborns to a select group of private hospitals cut waiting times from 6 h to 45 min and was good for infants. The next hearing is scheduled for Jan 13, 2025.

On Nov 29, the Büyükdere Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office ordered that suspects’ assets be seized and trustees appointed to hospitals and companies involved in the case: Avcılar Hospital, Doğa Hospital, TRG Hospitalist, Silivri Kolan, Esenler Güney, Birinci, İstanbul Şafak, Avrupa Şafak, İstanbul Şafak, Bağcılar Şafak, Reyap İstanbul, Çorlu Reyap, Bağcılar Medilife, and Beylikdüzü Medilife. The Health Ministry will operate these hospitals, and appoint their health personnel.

Alpay Azap, President of the Turkish Medical Association, fears a crisis of trust. “There are now questions among Turkish citizens about whether surgeons make their decisions according to financial motives. This is why we believe private hospitals should no longer be able to charge citizens in these cases. SGK [Social Security Institution] should no longer accept private hospitals as service providers. Instead, public hospitals should invest in intensive care units, take care of hospitals, and inspect their services.” There are “excellent private hospitals” in Türkiye, Azap added, “it’s just the government shouldn’t finance them”.

“Private companies aim to maximise the profit”, Azap said. “This is in their nature. And now we’re experiencing a crisis of trust in the system because of the commercialization of health services. There should be a zero-money relationship between patients and surgeons. Once that trust is severed, it’s tough to build it back.”

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