**REUTERS**

**Sick Greek economy takes heavy toll on health**

By Kate Kelland

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[Greece](http://uk.reuters.com/places/greece)'s debt crisis is hitting the health of the nation hard, with the number of suicides increasing, more people turning to drugs and prostitution and rapidly rising rates of HIV infections, researchers said on Monday.

Swingeing budget cuts and growing unemployment are pushing more people into severe depression and drug-dependence, and cutbacks in hospital budgets and healthcare services mean fewer people can see their doctors or access help.

"The picture of health in Greece is concerning," said David Stuckler, a sociologist at Britain's University of Cambridge who reported his findings in the Lancet medical journal.

"We're seeing ... worrisome trends -- a doubling of suicides, rising homicides, a 50 percent rise in HIV infections and people reporting that their health has got worse but they're not going to the doctor even though they felt they needed to."

In the past two years, the Greek government has imposed harsh austerity measures to deal with a debt mountain as the country plummeted into its deepest recession in 40 years and was forced to accept an EU-IMF bailout.

Greece is expected to run out of cash as soon as mid-November. Inspectors from the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank -- the so-called "troika" -- are currently assessing whether Athens has fulfilled the criteria for more aid.

In the meantime, businesses are shutting down, the public sector is shrinking and unemployment is running at more than 16 percent.

Health budget cuts have also led Greece to slash the prices it will pay for medicines, triggering supply concerns.

Stuckler's team found that suicides rose by 17 percent in 2009 from 2007 and said unofficial data quoted in Greece's parliament point to even greater rises, of 25 to 40 percent.

The data mirror grim local news reports.

In tales that have shocked Athenians, a former businessman was reported to have jumped to his death leaving a note saying the financial crisis drove him to it, and the owner of a small retail firm was found hanging from rope tied to a bridge.

His suicide note said simply: "Don't look for other reasons.

The economic crisis led me to this."

LESSON TO OTHERS

Martin McKee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who worked with Stuckler on the Lancet paper, said other struggling European nations should take note.

"The experience of Greece is a warning of what can happen if there are major cuts to healthcare in the face of a recession," he said in a telephone interview.

A previous study by McKee, Stuckler and others in July found suicide rates across Europe rose sharply in the two years to 2009 as the financial crisis drove unemployment up and squeezed incomes. Greece and [Ireland](http://uk.reuters.com/places/ireland) were worst hit.

In Monday's paper, the researchers also found a significant increase in HIV infections in Greece in late 2010 and said data suggest that new infections with the virus that causes AIDS will rise by 52 percent this year compared to last.

Rates of heroin use rose by 20 percent in 2009, and at the same time, budget cuts in 2009 and 2010 meant a loss of a third of the country's street-work programs designed to help drug addicts and provide them with HIV prevention services.

Stuckler said there were reports of some drug users deliberately infecting themselves with HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, to get access to welfare benefits of 700 euros ($940) a month and faster admission into drug substitution programs.

"It's really alarming," he said.

Greece has had a rocky relationship with pharmaceutical companies as a result of the crisis, imposing some of the most draconian price cuts for medicines of any European country, with unpaid bills a further burden for pharmaceutical companies.

Swiss group Roche has stopped delivering cancer drugs to some state-funded Greek hospitals that have not paid their bills, with patients being told to collect medicines from privately run pharmacies as they are more reliable payers.

Roche and other drugmakers have also been forced to accept Greek government bonds instead of cash for some outstanding debts -- a move that is expected to increase bad debt provisions, although Greece accounts for only around 1 percent of the global pharmaceuticals market.

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**Greeks pay for the debt** **crisis with their health: Demand for services rises steeply but budgets cut Drug addiction, HIV cases and suicide on increase**  
**BYLINE:** Helena Smith Athens Sarah Boseley  
  
**SECTION:** GUARDIAN INTERNATIONAL PAGES; Pg. 18  
  
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It is 4am on the emergency ward of Evangelismos general hospital - the biggest in Greece - and the stream of patients is relentless.

Dr Michalis Samarkos has not stopped working since he started his shift some 14 hours earlier, and he has been besieged by patients unable to afford the tests or the drugs they need.

Many, like the unemployed diabetic man he has just examined, have gone without treatment for several days.

"When you see a diabetic unable to afford his insulin you know he is going to die," said Samarkos.

"There is no infrastructure to help these people.

On every front the system has failed the people it was meant to serve."

Greeks are paying for their economic disaster with their health, according to a new study published today.

In a letter to the Lancet medical journal, a team lead by Dr Alexander Kentikelenis and Dr David Stuckler from Cambridge University and Professor Martin McKee from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine warns of a potential "Greek tragedy".

They point to signs of a dramatic decline in the health of the population and a deterioration of services at hospitals under financial pressure.

Many Greeks have lost access to healthcare coverage through work and social security plans, and increased poverty means growing numbers who would have used the private sector are now attending state hospitals.

Alongside savage spending cuts, the rise has put an immense strain on a chaotic and corrupt system that was already in decline.

Hospital budgets fell by 40% between 2007 and 2009, say the Lancet authors.

There are reports of understaffing, shortages of medical supplies and patients bribing medical staff to jump queues.

"There are signs that health outcomes have worsened, especially in vulnerable groups," write the experts.

There was a 14% rise in the number of Greeks reporting their health as "bad" or "very bad" between 2007 and 2009.

Suicides rose by 17% during the same period, and unofficial 2010 data quoted in parliament mention a 25% rise compared with 2009.

The health minister reported a 40% rise in the first half of 2011 compared with the same period in 2010.

"The national suicide helpline reported that 25% of callers faced financial difficulties in 2010 and reports in the media indicate that the inability to repay high levels of personal debt might be a key factor in the increase in suicides," the Lancet authors write.

"Violence has also risen, and homicide and theft rates nearly doubled between 2007 and 2009."

Their analysis is based on data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.

Pressure on health services may account for a rise of 15% between 2007 and 2009 in the numbers who say they did not see a doctor though they thought they should.

Long waiting times and travel distances to clinics were among reasons cited.

GP and hospital outpatient care is virtually free, but many Greeks cannot even afford the euros 5 (£4.30) fee they are required to pay when visiting public outpatient clinics, and doctors say they are often forced to haggle over fees.

Meanwhile, there has been a marked rise in the number of people admitted to hospital - up 24% between 2009 and 2010 and up another 8% in the first half of 2011 compared with the same period last year.

The impact of cuts on drugs services appears particularly troubling. HIV infections rose significantly in 2010, with injecting drug users accounting for half of the rise.

The numbers are on course to rise by 52% this year.

Many new infections are linked to rises in prostitution and unsafe sex.

Heroin use reportedly rose by 20% in 2009, according to estimates from the Greek Documentation and Monitoring Centre for Drugs.

Budget cuts in 2009 and 2010 have meant the loss of a third of the country's outreach programmes.

"Overall, the picture of health in Greece is concerning," write the Lancet authors.

"In an effort to finance debts, ordinary people are paying the ultimate price: losing access to care and preventive services, facing higher risks of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, and in the worst cases losing their lives.

Greater attention to health and healthcare access is needed to ensure that the Greek crisis does not undermine the ultimate source of the country's wealth - its people."