

Opinion
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Encouraging Message From the Korean Academy of Medical Sciences to Junior Doctors in Struggle

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(This is a speech given at a mass rally at Yoido Square on March 3, 2024, protesting the government's unilateral policy to increase the number of medical students by as many as 2,000 per year.¹ In response to this policy, junior doctors have resigned from their residencies and internships throughout Korea.²)

We stand here today in despair. We also express our apologies and sorrow to the young Korean doctors who are fighting against this government's policy. Of course, we also apologize to the Korean people for the resulting disturbance in the healthcare process. However, we have to tell you why we are here today.

Our healthcare system has achieved remarkable results in spite of its short existence. Foreigners who come to Korea and experience the Korean medical system, surprised repeatedly. First, they are surprised to visit a doctor with no appointment. Then, they are surprised to have various tests done on a one-stop visit and receive the results right away. And lastly, they are surprised once more by the cheap medical cost. According to various OECD health statistics, in terms of cost-effectiveness, the Korean health system is showing very good performance.

However, there are many deep-rooted problems behind the Korean healthcare system. It is subject to the mandatory national health insurance which offers extremely low fees. As a result, medical institutions have had to make ends meet by providing non-benefit treatment modalities as well as treating crowds of patients. Furthermore, the Korean healthcare system has been maintained through the excessively long working hours of junior doctors. The government criticizes non-benefit treatment modalities, but the truth is that non-benefit treatment modalities are upholding the Korean healthcare system.

But one day, out of the blue, the government decided to break this precarious balance at once. Furthermore it criminalized doctors who protested against this coercive mandate. If doctors were not to oppose the government's push for this unilateral policy, Korea could not be called a democratic nation.

The Korean Academy of Medical Sciences (KAMS) strongly condemns the government's tyrannical attitude of treating physicians as felons. In contrast to average citizens who work up to 52 hours a week, junior doctors (interns and residents) routinely work up to 88 hours a week. In reality, many young doctors work nearly 100 hours a week.

The government can, of course, criticize young doctors for submitting their resignations. But if we are indeed in a democratic country, how can the government announce such threatening remarks as “We will annul your medical license,” “We will prohibit hospitals from accepting your resignations,” or “We will pronounce maximum criminal sentence.”³

KAMS strongly condemns the government's attitude of completely ignoring the practical opinions of professors in the field of medical education. Professors in charge of medical education say it is impossible to increase the number of medical professors rapidly in response to the government's announcement that it will increase 1,000 medical professors in an instant to educate the suddenly increased number of medical students. It is common knowledge that medical professors cannot be mass-produced in a short period of time.

KAMS strongly condemns the government's unilateral coercive policy implementation. The government is arguing that it is urgent to increase the number of medical students to solve the ‘doctor shortage,’ citing open runs in pediatrics and disruptions in the emergency room system. It is as if a large building is on fire with many people's lives in danger. The fire must be extinguished speedily. We can channel groundwater from nearby. But this government says it will build a reservoir.

The government is preoccupied with the policy of increasing students in medical schools. It is questionable how many of the doctors thus produced will be engaged in ‘vital medicine’ that deals with vitals. The government's measures are surprisingly incoherent. There is nothing to expect but the so-called trickle-down effect.

Young doctors have left the hospital. Fellow doctors will leave the hospital soon, too. Under the current conditions of the Korean healthcare system, medical professors will be able to endure on the medical scene for only a limited time. Why should patients suffer for policies that have questionable benefit at best?

The unilateral policy that the government is trying to enforce now will lead to the collapse of our healthcare system.

KAMS looks toward the government and the medical community hoping each will take a step back and discuss these policies together to prevent public disaster. The government should not blame the junior doctors. KAMS vows to do all that it can to protect our young doctors.⁴ Thank you.

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