

Medical care of homeless people in Germany

Life on the street is a major health burden for people in a situation of homelessness. Homelessness leads to serious physical health conditions and even the smallest injury can become life-threatening without treatment. The fact that most people in a situation of homelessness have no health insurance exacerbates health risks.

The International Society for Human Rights (IGFM) - German section e.V. provides very good general information about homelessness on its website <https://www.igfm.de/hilfe-fuer-obdachlose>. Further useful information is available on the website of the Journal of Doctors aerzteblatt.de in the article 'The Medical Treatment of Homeless People':¹

The article describes the claims of several social organizations based in Berlin who call for better medical care for homeless people as well as for access to health care for everybody, regardless of an existing health insurance coverage. Social organizations also advocate for better low-threshold dental care.

The report was presented by the Round Table medical and dental care of homeless people in Berlin, a merger founded by the Berlin Caritas Association and the free welfare carrier Gebewo. It presents results from a data collected on treatments during 2016 in ten institutions and contact points. These services offer low-threshold treatment for people in a situation of homelessness, regardless of health insurance - for example in doctor's mobile homes or day-care centers. The report also makes the point that most homeless people are not reached by regular medical care services. In 2016, around 27,000 consultations took place in the ten services.

There are several reasons why people in a situation of homelessness do not access mainstream medical services such as anxiety, shame, lack of trust, distance, physical or mental disability, financial problems, language problems, lack of disease awareness, constant worry and search for a place to sleep, organizational reasons (lack of information about nearest doctor's office, ensure possessions are safe), meeting deadlines, ban on alcohol and drug use in medical services, lack of cooperation by medical professionals, incomplete medical history, medical amnesia, lack of communication facilities (telephone / Internet) and, last but not least, missing ID.

In order to improve the medical care of homeless people, the self-representation of people in a situation of homelessness demands:

- We demand a health insurance for all (example Canada)
- No difference in treatment for people experiencing homelessness
- More mobile services and on-site care
- Better financial support of support organizations
- Provision of free medicines e.g. by pharmaceutical companies that provide to pharmacies and other medical services.
- Observance of the Hippocratic oath by doctors and hospitals

¹ <https://www.aerzteblatt.de/int/archive/article/193682/The-medical-treatment-of-homeless-people>

- Hospitals to ensure the full recovery of patients.
- Ensure acute health care services as well as treatment of chronic diseases
- Better care of people experiencing homelessness who have mental health issues
- We refer to Article 1 (1) of the Basic Law: "Human dignity is inviolable" and Article 2 (2) of the Basic Law: Everyone has the right to life and physical integrity. "

Medical professionals have the following demands to policy makers:

- Better pay for doctors who treat people in a situation of homelessness.
- Improve health support for people experiencing homelessness who have mental health issues as a hard-to-reach group.
- Better recognition of volunteer doctors and nurses
- Avoid any negative legal consequences for doctors who provide medicines (drugs) to people in homelessness: Donations of drugs are in some cases punishable; this must be re-regulated.
- Take measures against the rise of drug use problems.
- Improve psychological care provided by homeless services.
- Ensure follow-up care for ill homeless people.
- Hospitals should have guardians who are able to professionally handle violent/conflict situations which might occur among patients who are homeless.

As complex the problem of providing medical care to homeless people is, it can only be solved through provision of housing, adequate financing for building new housing and above all understanding and care for the person with experience of homelessness.

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