THE CONTRIBUTION OF DONATIONS TO THE GREEK NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEM FOR THE EFFECTIVE TREATMENT OF COVID-19

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2020.1108.5523

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2020, Greece and its healthcare system had to limit the consequences of the spreading of the new coronavirus under the name SARS CoV-2 (Huang et al., 2020). The virus SARS CoV-2 or 2019-nCoV, originated in the city of Wuhan, which is located in the Hubei district of China (Zu et al., 2020). However, it quickly grew into a pandemic (Holshue et al., 2020), afflicting most countries around the world (Giovanetti et al., 2020). The virus SARS CoV-2 falls into the category of coronaviruses which usually cause respiratory infections of varied severity to both people and animals (WHO, 2020). The peculiarity of the new coronavirus is related to the fact that it is a strain which was isolated in a human body for the first time, causing the COVID-19 disease (ECDC, 2020).

For the specific disease there is not as yet any vaccine or approved treatment.

In order to effectively deal with the emergency situation that emerged, the Greek government timely took a series of measures (L. 64/2020), which aimed both at the prevention and avoidance of citizens’ interaction and the care of those who became ill (L. 68/2020). At the same time, at the conference of the Central Board of Health Regions, which took place on January 27th, 2020, there was presented the action plan of the Hellenic Ministry of Health and the country’s National Public Health Organization regarding the instance of detection of a potential coronavirus case in Greece. During the same conference, the coronavirus reference public hospitals throughout the country were determined (Hellenic Ministry of Health, 2020a). In this context, for northern Greece -
particularly for the geographic regions of Macedonia and Thrace, the AHEPA University General Hospital of Thessaloniki was determined as the basic reference hospital, and as substitutes the University General Hospital of Alexandroupoli and the General Hospital of Ptolemaida “BODOSAKEIO” (Panhellenic Medical Association, 2020). In fact, at the AHEPA University General Hospital of Thessaloniki the first confirmed positive case of the disease COVID-19 in Greece was hospitalized on February 26th, 2020 (Hellenic Ministry of Health, 2020b). The woman who became ill had visited the region of northern Italy, but eventually she managed to escape danger and was discharged with a clean bill of health (Hellenic Ministry of Health, 2020c).

The present project is focused on the investigation of the contribution of the donations which took place in the COVID-19 pandemic period towards the Greek National Health System and particularly the AHEPA U.G.T.H. which constituted the Basic Reference Hospital for the coronavirus and for this reason, it has been selected as a case study. As goals were set the estimation of the financial value of the donations that were made to the hospital and their classification, the donors’ profiling, as well as the showcasing of their social characteristics. Furthermore, the research was centered on the analysis of the procedure that was followed by the hospital institution for their acceptance and utilization.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material which was used concerned the acceptance decisions of the donations that the Administrative Board of the hospital institution received. In the Greek health system, the Administrative Board constitutes the supreme decision making instrument on a hospital level and it decides, among others, on the donations and bequests acceptance toward the hospital (Goula, 2007). The Administrative Board bears the final responsibility for all the decisions and it is at the head of the official organizational structure of the institutions (Wolper, 2001).

The time period that was studied was traced back to April 2020 as the conferences of the Administrative Board started then, as it was established a new following the end of its term of office. Correspondingly, it was completed in June of the same year. The decisions of the Administrative Board in reference to the specific three (3) months were derived from the electronic networking program of “Clarity” (in Greek: “Diavgeia”), where they were registered in the thematic field of Donations-Subsidizations.

In the electronic program of “Clarity”, the total of the administrative and financial activity of all the public sectors is posted mandatorily (L. 3861/2010) – including health organizations. There is the exception of the topics which are connected with the state national security and the sensitive personal data, which is not made public (National School of Public Administration, 2011). This way, it is ensured that the decisions which are made are characterized by transparency and that both citizens-users and health professionals can access them freely. The actions and the decisions of the public organizations are not allowed to be carried out unless they have been posted in advance on the platform of the program (Voutsidou et al, 2019a). Therefore, all decisions on administrative and financial issues must be published as a condition for their implementation, after obtaining a single Number of Internet Upload (NIU) which comprises its “identity” from then on (Voutsidou et al, 2019b).

The processing of the research findings, after their compilation, was done with the software program Microsoft Office Excel 2007 following the process of checking, encoding, transcribing and statistic editing, using all the essential tools of statistics. Afterwards, a comparison of the compiled data to the administrative and financial services of the AHEPA U.G.T.H. was carried out. There was a review of Greek and international bibliography beforehand, with the utilization of public libraries and valid databases. There were also used recent instructions of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international organizations, the press releases which were issued by the Hellenic Ministry of Health, as well as the editions of the Official State Gazette (OSG), in which the related to the topic legislation was published.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Donations and AHEPA University General Hospital of Thessaloniki

As shown by the following table 1, during the time period from April to June 2020, there were held eight (8) scheduled Conferences by the Administrative Board of the AHEPA U.G.T.H. In those, on the whole, 157 topics of donations acceptance toward the hospital institution were approved. As a matter of fact, it is noteworthy that four (4) of those took place in the month of April on a weekly basis, processing the majority of reviewed topics (120 topics). This fact demonstrates not only the criticality of the situation that prevailed in the hospital, but also the immediacy which was shown in its handling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference number (f)</th>
<th>Scheduled Conferences</th>
<th>Donations Topics (o)</th>
<th>Total value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24/4/2020</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>€5,540.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3/10/2020</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>€564,077.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4/15/2020</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>€1,305,545.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5/30/2020</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>€99,808.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/5/2020</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>€1,861.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8/28/2020</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>€65,696.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10/6/2020</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>€11,974.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11/6/2020</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>€10,110.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>2,154,613.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hellenic Republic Ministry of Internal Affairs, “Diavgeia” webpage, 2020 (processed data)

The donations total amount toward the AHEPA University General Thessaloniki Hospital for the specific three (3) months exceeded the 2,000,000 euros, reaching €2,154,613.58. In the particular sum there have not been taken into account 67 decisions of the Administrative Board which were not priced and concerned mostly food and clothing items donations.

Donation types

The donation types which were offered to the AHEPA University General Thessaloniki Hospital are characterized by a wide variety. As demonstrated in table 2, the vast majority of
donations (88% in percentage) pertain foremost to medical equipment, the value of which is estimated to €1,892,434. Moreover, the donations concern basic necessities equipment, for the handling of the current COVID-19 pandemic, €176,182.78 in value. In the medical equipment that was donated there are included electric beds and either Intensive Care Units beds or Increased Care Units beds, patient observation monitors, ultrasounds, cardiographs, defibrillators, examination beds, electronic computers and diagnostic monitors, treatment beds with mattresses and bedside tables, air-conditioning and ventilating devices, laminar flow and biosecurity chambers, a negative pressure chamber, biosafety laboratories, as well as a fully equipped monitor for the transfer of intubated patients. Correspondingly, in the basic necessities equipment there are included stretchers, blood pressure gauges, lung ventilators, contactless thermometers, air sterilization devices, apnea devices, sanitization filters and systems, stethoscopes, oximeters, tracheostomy materials for the Intensive Care Unit, reagents, patient transfer wheelchairs, electric suction trolleys and medicine trolleys.

The reimbursement of the hospital with means of individual protection was also significant, €71,567.74 in value. In this category there are included full-face masks and face shields, disposable masks or textile washable ones, gloves, overshoes, full-bodied medical uniforms, protective overalls, protective glasses and helmets, non-invasive ventilation helmets (coronavirus), visors, disinfectants, sanitizers, gauzes, as well as two-piece outfits (shirt-pants for Intensive Care and Anesthesiology Units).

Except for the above there were also donated to the hospital various other items of an estimated value of €11,869.06, such as hospital waste cardboard boxes, hands-free earplugs, hand lotions, wall paints, books, bins, stainless steel boxes, trolley carts, refrigerators, freezers, a bedding air mattress, a statue, as well as technological devices and electrical appliances such as dishwashers, toasters, coffee-makers, kettles, portable vacuum cleaners, microwave ovens, televisions, air-conditioners, landline phone devices, web cameras and tablets. In the other provisions, €2,560 in value, there are included renovation services, food catering services, transfer of items or fresh air intake vents, as well as electronic equipment.

On the other hand, in the non-priced donations there are included the foodstuffs and clothing items. The food category comprises salads, fruit salads, individual meals, juices and bottled water, frozen vegetables, tin cans, olive oil, honey and other bee-keeping products, royal jelly, halvah, chocolates and sweets. In the clothing items there are included sheets, blankets, wall-to-wall carpets, pillows, bathrobes, towels, pillow cases and duvet covers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donation type</th>
<th>Total value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical equipment</td>
<td>€1,892,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic necessities equipment</td>
<td>€176,182.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual protection means</td>
<td>€71,567.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various items</td>
<td>€11,869.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other provisions</td>
<td>€2,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>€2,154,613.58</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most substantial donation toward the hospital came from the company HELLENIC PETROLEUM AS and it concerned one (1) fully automated system of Molecular Diagnosis SARS-CoV2 (NeuMoDx 96 Molecular System) as well as 5,000 reagents, along with 2,000 reagent tests of Molecular Detection Sars-CoV-2, of a total value of €579,543 (4th Conference/4.15.2020, Topic 25th, NIU: 6APB469064-2Δ and 11th Conference/6.25.2020, Topic 12th, NIU: ΩΟΩΙ0469064-AA2). On the whole, HELLENIC PETROLEUM, a stock company with the participation of both the state and individuals, decided to donate 8,000,000 euros to the Greek National Health System (Hellenic Petroleum, 2020).

Respectively, the donation that stood out for its innovation and technology utilization came from the LTFN NANOTECHNOLOGY LABORATORY of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. As pointed out in their letter, “the LTFN Nanotechnology Laboratory of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in collaboration with the Nano-medicine companies Nanobiomed and Nanotechnology Organic Electronic Technologies, part of a wider technology ecosystem in the area of Thessaloniki, which, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic utilizing their longtime research, technology and innovation, joined forces in the manufacturing of new products, which include 3D masks with nanofilters, protective shields with nano-materials and nano-material sprays for the protection of our country’s healthcare staff.

The first nanotechnology masks and shields internationally with antivirus protection, which were manufactured with the 3D-printing method, advanced materials and nanotechnology procedures, we offer as a donation and recognition of the great work that is carried out at the Coronavirus Reference Center of the AHEPA hospital. All the products (15 masks and 75 multi-use nanofilters, as well as 15 face-protective shields) and donation materials have been sterilized and packaged based on all healthcare sterilization regulations.

As Director of the LTFN Nanotechnology Laboratory, I feel proud because Nanotechnology and Nano-medicine, which I have been serving for 30 years, are in a stand-by position against the pandemic that all mankind is experiencing. With a high appreciation and respect for your proffered work, I wish a Happy Easter and a Happy Resurrection to you and the AHEPA staff” (5th Conference/4.30.2020, Topic 102ND, NIU: ΩΞ469064-ΤΒΒ).

Since the celebration of the Orthodox Easter was overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic, there were also donations of a symbolic nature. In this context, the AS Company Ltd., a private company which is active in the sector of manufacturing and trading of children’s toys, along with the donation of 700 full-bodied medical uniforms, proceeded to send Easter candles for the families of the staff of the hospital’s Intensive Care Unit (5th Conference/4.30.2020, Topic 87th, NIU: 9ΟΥΒ469064-860). What is more, the company Puratos Hellas I.C.S.A., which is active in the confectionery sector, donated individual packages containing Easter traditional sweets and chocolates for the healthcare staff of the Intensive Care Unit of the AHEPA U.G.T.H. (5th Conference/4.30.2020, Topic 102ND, NIU: 9ΟΥB469064-860).
Donors

The donors of the hospital represent the Greek society as a whole. Their majority comprises companies and businesses (98), which, however, do not come exclusively from the health sector, but also represent the entire spectrum of business activity, contributing the sum of €1,287,907.62 with their donations. In the donors there are also included institutions of all kinds, both public and private, such as education centers, banks, private clinics, charitable institutions and public utility bodies, of a non-profit character (16), which contributed donations of €529,330 in value. Furthermore, the participation of associations and cooperatives was significant (26), with donations amounting to €122,344.96. Even simple citizens (17) took the initiative as private entities to rally in support of not only the hospital provided health services, but also the staff serving it with donations amounting to €215,031.

Especially the companies associate their donations to the AHEPA U.G.T.H., with their social responsibility. The cosmetics company CREAM TEAM I.C.S.A. - DUST+CREAM constitutes a notable example of that tendency. The Marketing Director informs through a letter that they wish, via the programme Corporate Social Responsibility, to proceed to the donation of 2,000 surgical masks to the hospital (5th Conference/4.30.2020, Topic 98th, NIU: Ω2ΠIB469064-O17).

This is also the case for the food company Upfield Hellas, who typically remark in the letter they sent: “As the coronavirus continues to spread all over the world, in Upfield Hellas we all observe the developments on a local, regional and universal level with great sensitivity and dedication, thoroughly realizing the challenges of the times. Fully aware of our social responsibility, we decided to directly support the difficult and essential work of the hospital units that have undertaken throughout our country the healthcare and tackling of the COVID-19 cases, as has yours.

Recognizing the huge effort that every single employee makes at your units every day, with singular devotion, for the good of our fellow beings in this crucial period for Greece, we proceed to the donation of 1,200 liters of olive oil [...], to all these hospital units. Wishing that you and your families are coping with calmness and safety with the difficulties of the current situation, we assure you that the entire family of Upfield comes to your aid, both by means of this donation and our everyday dedication to ensure the smooth catering of all the food sale spots in every place of the country.

The pandemic we are up against is a matter that concerns all of us and we, on our part, as responsible social partners, assure you that we do everything possible in this hard juncture to assist the state’s efforts so as to handle the situation. Since, in fact, no measure against the coronavirus can work without the cooperation and participation of the citizens, of all of us, we responsibly commit ourselves that we adhere to the individual hygiene and protection measures which are necessary, in order to decrease the possibility of the virus spreading to a big percentage of the population and, at the same time, to facilitate your work. Hoping that this too will pass, like everything else, we thank all of you as a whole and each one separately. Our warmest congratulations on your challenging work and the social sensitivity you and your entire staff are notable for” (5th Conference/4.30.2020, Topic 94th, NIU: ΩΘΨ469064-6Γ8). Similar in spirit is also the letter of the head of the conglomerate “SAMARAS & CO.”, a company which provides technical and advisory services in the industry field, in which, among others, is mentioned: “Understanding the unprecedented situation that our country is also experiencing due to the unexpected pandemic, in an attempt to stay consistent with the anthropocentric philosophy of the conglomerate “Samaras & Co.”, and in the context of our corporate responsibility, we feel we have an obligation to support, in these hard times, the superhuman and heroic efforts to protect the health of all of us. The Conglomerate’s administration and I personally would like to offer you a palette, which will contain 200X4 liters, in total 800 liters of sanitizing liquid as a token of our appreciation for your work. As a warm thank you for the contribution of all of you, who are standing at the forefront of this battle, the doctors, the nurses and AHEPA’s staff in general, who all this time fight daily with self-denial. Because apart from knowledge, you also daily offer your soul, your heart and decency” (11th Conference/6.25.2020, Topic 7th, NIU: ΟΠΙΝ469064-XΕΞ).

Procedure of donation acceptance and utilization

For the acceptance of the donations that were offered to the AHEPA U.G.T.H. and their best possible utilization in the context of the proper functioning of the hospital institution, there was determined a five-member work Committee, in order to evaluate them. The purpose of the Committee was to cover the emergencies deriving from the taking of individual or collective precaution measures, of avoidance and limitation of the COVID-19 spreading, of the patients’ hospitalization and treatment (Administrator’s Decision No. 424/7.4.2020, NIU: ΩΔ8Τ469064-ΡΟΞ). The Committee was made up of the Director of Medical Service of the hospital, the responsible Inflections Professor, the Anesthesiology Director, the Technical Services Director and the Chief of the Economic Department Sub-directorate. The Committee’s duties also included the writing down of the Minutes, with which they compiled their proposal to the hospital’s Administrative Board. The Committee was assisted in their work by the hospital’s Scientific Board, which is the main consultative body regarding issues of healthcare treatment and medication, as well as issues of investigative, educational and generally scientific character. Moreover, the donors’ documents were made available to the relevant divisions, laboratories, clinics and services of the hospital for their information and mainly their Chief’s agreement. So as to ensure the quality and safety, the donations regarding foodstuffs were accompanied by the appropriate certificates of food quality and safety, which were delivered to the Chief of the Nutrition Department. Respectively, safety certificates were submitted to the Chief of the Biomedical Technology Department for the medical equipment offered to the hospital, along with instruction manuals and a written warrantee for the machinery.

As the Administrative Board’s term of office had ended, there were no conferences in the month of March. Thus, as far as the time period from 3.18.2020 to 3.27.2020 was concerned, the donations to the AHEPA University General Thessaloniki Hospital were accepted with decisions made by the hospital’s Manager. These decisions were afterwards verified and approved during the first conference that the newly-founded
CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings derived from the study of the donations toward the AHEPA U.G.T.H., the coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece was considered a collective matter. The Society of citizens assisted the Greek National Health System, creating a two-way interaction relationship. Generally speaking, the national benefactors of Greece constituted a long tradition and were inextricably linked with the establishment of the modern Greek state at the beginning of the 19th century. As the country was territorially small and financially vulnerable, it largely relied on the wealthy Greeks of diaspora who offered their help profusely. They undertook not only the erection of magnificent buildings, such as the Zappeion Megaro in the center of Athens, but also the provision of war equipment, with the leading example of the purchase of the “Averof” battleship, which played a crucial role in the Greek military successes at sea during the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913.

Nowadays, it seems that the recent economic crisis that Greece went through and the tarnishing of its international image sensitized the Greeks anew. They proved in practice, on the occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic that the country has at its disposal both the human resources and the will, as well as the sensitivity to heal its wounds. In this context, public and private bodies as well as a multitude of individuals, eponymous and anonymous, rushed to the aid of the Greek National Health System. Of the multitude of action on a national level, it is noteworthy to mention the donation of the Stavros Niarchos’ foundation, 7.5 million euros in value (Stavros Niarchos Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, the Onassis Foundation has secured and allotted 13.5 million protective masks in order to shield the doctors and nurses (Onassis Foundation, 2020). On its part, the Ioannis S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation proceeded to a monetary donation, amounting to 5 million euros, toward the Blood Donation National Center (John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, 2020), while the Greek Aegean Airlines offered free airline tickets to the medical, healthcare and administrative staff of the COVID-19 reference hospitals (Aegean, 2020).

The history of the AHEPA University General Hospital is connected with the contribution to the nation, as well. The hospital was founded in 1951 as a result of a donation from the Greco-American guild “AHEPANS” toward the suffering people in Greece and especially, the city of Thessaloniki, which had just come out of the devastation of World War II and the fratricidal Civil War. Ever since, the AHEPA U.G.T.H. constituted a symbol of the benefactors and their public contribution. Within a time period of three (3) months, the donations to the hospital exceeded the two (2) million euros, a very significant sum, taking into account that, according to the 1st modification of the institution’s budget for the financial year 2020, the total budget of the AHEPA U.G.T.H. is in the range of 87 million euros, with the expenditure limit of the current year reaching the 45 million euros (Order of the Minister of Health No. Β2.α./Τ.II. 25782/30.4.2020, NIU: ΩΩΠΝ465ΦΥΟ-ΒΑ8). This means that the total of donations, within a time period of three (3) months, is equal to the 4.7 of the hospital annual budget. The figure is impressive if someone actually factors into the number and amount of donations to the hospital before the emergence of COVID-19. According to the available data which was made public in the electronic program of “Clarity”, during the whole year of 2019 the total of donations to the AHEPA U.G.T.H. amounted to 88, €64,773.83 in value.

It seems that the boost of donations toward the Greek National Health System was also encouraged by the official state, simplifying the followed procedures and institutionalizing financial incentives. More specifically, the exemption from paying Value Added Tax (VAT) was provided for in the goods deliveries and services provisions in the context of donation making (L. 942/2020). Simultaneously, the immediate acceptance of donations by health organizations was facilitated, without the requirement of an earlier approval by the Minister of Finance (L. 75/2020).

The donations moved toward two main directions. The first axis concerned the healthcare units and had as a goal the reinforcement of hospital equipment to better care for patients. Special attention was paid to children and vulnerable groups, as well as to the chronically ill, kidney patients, patients with heart disease or oncology patients. The vast majority of donations was related to the provision of expensive medical equipment, of a value of €1,892,434, endowing the hospital and its infrastructure and releasing institutional funds. This fact becomes especially important in view of the economic crisis which afflicted the country the previous years (Souliotis et al, 2018) and inevitably affected the health services, as well (Maragkaki et al, 2019).

The second axis pertained to the human resources of hospital institutions, aiming at the support of health professionals and, particularly, the healthcare staff and the employees at the Intensive Care and Anesthesiology Units, as well as the Emergency Room. Many donors’ letters contained wishes and support messages to the hospital workers, so as to psychologically fortify them in their difficult mission. In a letter from the Judicial Bailiffs’ Association of Thessaloniki Appeal Court, there is mentioned their intention to donate to the hospital healthcare materials (a thousand face masks and a thousand gloves, €1,000 in total value) “as a minimum token of appreciation and gratitude to all of you in the front line for the immense work you offer in these hard times under unprecedented circumstances. May God’s help and grace be with you” (8th Conference/5.28.2020, Topic 36th, NIU: 6ΒΚ0469064-Ν95). Finally, it is typically remarked in another letter (8th Conference/5.28.2020, Topic 36th, NIU: Ψ4Τ3469064-ΩΔΩ): “The “Sizio” association consists of children’s parents who suffer from blindness and additional disabilities and its main goals are their equal education and social incorporation, as well as both the children’s and their families’ support. Living in a society where disability is continually in crisis, the current crisis due to Covid-19 comes only to further hamper the...
children’s and their families’ lives, as well as the constant struggle of the Association. For this reason, we believe that we are able to appreciate even more the merit of the struggle which is given on a daily basis at your Hospital by all of you people at the forefront. During this period, we view you as “our own people” even more.

So, wishing to contribute as well to your huge effort, as far as the Association’s means allow us, we want to make known to you the “Sizoí’s” A.B. decision to offer your Hospital hardware equipment, which, according to the data you provided us with at an earlier communication, is regarded as necessary for covering your increased needs. They comprise 1 Littmann Classic III 3M Adult Stethoscope and 3 Contec Finger Pulse Oximeters.

Please accept this small offer from our Association, which comes from of our own permanent needs with great love. We apologize for not having the ability to help more now that there are even greater needs. We wish you health and strength so as to go on with your struggle, from which we are certain you will emerge victorious. Alongside you, we will all be victorious”.

Acknowledgments
Special thanks to the AHEPA U.G.T.H. public servants Mrs. Fostira Kiriakideli and Maria Kasaraki for their contribution to the compilation of data, as well as to the financial services of the hospital for the comparison of the information.

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How to cite this article:

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