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Polish Government COVID-19 advisors resign

The majority of Poland's COVID-19 medical advisory body have quit, saying that their advice has been ignored. Ed Holt reports.

Three quarters of Poland's COVID-19 medical advisory body have resigned amid claims that the government is ignoring its pandemic advice and tolerating anti-vaccine sentiment.

In a letter delivered to the government on Jan 14, 2022, 13 of the 17 members of the COVID-19 Medical Council explained their reasons for leaving the body. Complaining of a lack of cooperation from the government, they warned of "...the growing tolerance of the denial of COVID-19 and of the importance of vaccination in the fight against the pandemic...reflected in the statements of government and officials". The letter also criticised "the discrepancy between scientific and medical reasoning and practice" in the government's approach to past and current waves of infection.

Poland has one of the world's highest COVID-19 death rates per capita with more than 100 000 deaths from the disease. The vaccination rate of 56%, as of Jan 18, lags behind the EU average of 69%. In research on Polish attitudes to COVID-19 vaccination, published last year from Warsaw Medical University, one in three people aged 18–65 said that they would never get a COVID-19 vaccine. Hesitancy is particularly high in rural areas of the country where the ruling Law and Justice party has strong support.

Measures are in place to restrict the spread of COVID-19, but doctors, including those from the advisory body—which was made up exclusively of doctors and disease experts—have repeatedly highlighted their poor enforcement. Speaking to *The Lancet*, members of the Medical Council who resigned said that the government had increasingly ignored their advice over several months, and some politicians had begun to speak out against them.

Dr Robert Flisiak, president of the Polish Association of Epidemiologists and Infectologists, said cooperation between the Medical Council and the government had been excellent until the middle of 2021, when vaccination take-up in Poland began to slow amid strengthening anti-vaccine sentiment. "The government appeared to move more towards a wait-and-see approach and was reluctant to introduce any unpopular measures", he said. He put this down to politicians not wanting to lose support among voters sympathising with, or who were actively involved in, anti-vaccine movements.

The government recently refused to sack a regional education official and Law and Justice party supporter after she said COVID-19 vaccination was an "experiment", labelling her comments only "unfortunate".

Flisiak said ongoing obstruction by MPs (some from the Law and Justice party) of legislation on pandemic measures, coupled with the government's rejection in November of proposals by the Medical Council, including legislation to allow employees' COVID-19 status to be checked at companies and the introduction of a so-called COVID pass, "was pretty much the last straw". "We resigned because we saw we were no longer able to influence the decisions being taken," he said.

After the resignations, the government issued a statement saying: "It is the role of the government to make decisions based on the various positions of experts—the Medical Council, economists, experts from other areas affected by the epidemic."

Doctors not connected to the Medical Council said the government's reaction to the resignations was concerning. Krzysztof Filipiak, deputy rector of the

Medical University of Warsaw, said the statement suggested "that [Poland's] right-wing government has accepted enormous mortality and does not want to change anything".

The government is seeking to establish a new Medical Council. "It will have a wide spectrum of experts, including medical experts, economists, and sociologists. They will help and advise the Prime Minister. Currently, the Ministry of Health has a team of national consultants for various fields of medicine. They will continue to be the main source of advice for the minister of health", a Health Ministry spokesperson told *The Lancet*.

However, former Medical Council members have questioned whether their replacements will be any more successful in influencing policy. "The recommendations we made were very reasonable. I am afraid that if the next Medical Council advises the same things, the result [being ignored by the government] will be the same. If they recommend what the government wants to hear, the government will have no problems, but nothing will change", said Professor Anna Piekarska of the Department of Infectious Diseases and Hepatology, Medical University of Lodz.

The resignations come as the Health Ministry has warned that Poland is entering a fifth wave of COVID-19 infections and predicted the country would soon face its highest infection rate so far, and that the health-care system could come under enormous strain.

There are concerns over how severe the wave will be. "At the moment we have no COVID pass, and 44% of the population is unvaccinated. The next wave will be dramatic", said Piekarska.

Ed Holt

For more on the **COVID-19 Medical Council members leaving** see <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,173952,28002425,koronawirus-13-z-17-czlonkow-rady-medycznej-przy-premierze.html#s=BoxOpMT>

For more on **anti-vaccine groups in Poland** see <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/09/27/anti-vaccine-movement-founded-in-poland-with-support-of-ruling-party-mp/>

For more on **Poland's COVID-19 statistics** see <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/11/poland-becomes-latest-european-country-to-surpass-100-000-covid-related-deaths>

For more on **Warsaw Medical University research** see <https://bp.wum.edu.pl/node/2559?fbclid=IwAR3xwJMyL0ykJzjliWw4wE5wLxZX2Vle71HOP762Q0lclGeDjXTXQYh720>

For more on **Poland's infection rate** see <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/poland-expects-highest-infection-rate-wave-82322486>