

Hospitals target wealthy health tourists

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Unwanted newborn delivered to baby box

An unwanted baby has been left at a hospital in Einsiedeln. The foundling is the sixth in the nearly ten-year history of the baby window, which is unique in Switzerland.

The baby has been appointed a legal guardian and given a name. She remained in hospital for a few days before being placed in foster care.

The baby box is a joint project of Einsiedeln Regional Hospital and Swiss Aid for Mother and Child (SAMC), a pro-life organization. It was opened on May 9, 2001, as a service to women who either cannot or do not want to keep their babies – and wish to give them away anonymously. The baby window is there to help prevent child abandonment and infanticide.

If a woman places her newborn in the hatch, she is not punishable by law. However, if she abandons the baby, she could face up to five years' imprisonment.

For the first year and a half, the box remained untouched; then the first child – a newborn boy – was deposited there in September 2002.

Integrated into the outer wall of the hospital, the hatch opens to allow a baby to be placed in a small crib. Once the baby is settled, the mother closes the

window – which then locks to prevent any passers-by from removing the child.

After three minutes, a silent alarm goes off inside the hospital to alert the staff to the baby's presence. That gives the mother enough time to leave the hospital grounds if she is wary of being seen and identified.

However, the mother or father has the right to reclaim the child before it is adopted, a process which takes at least a year. A "dear mother" letter, printed in ten languages and found in the baby hatch, aims to reassure the mother while encouraging her to get in touch with either the hospital or the foundation.

When it was set up, the baby box was rather controversial. Opponents argued that it conflicted with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defends a child's right to know his or her own identity.

Germany has about 80 baby windows, with five in Berlin alone. Elsewhere in Europe, Italy has about ten baby windows, Hungary 12 and Poland 16. By contrast, Pakistan has 300. In the United States, there are "safe-haven" laws which allow parents to give away newborns anonymously.

Hospitals target wealthy health tourists

Swiss hospitals and clinics are increasingly looking over the border for patients, especially to countries in which the wealthy want high standards of medical care. Health tourists from Russia and the Middle East are among those attracted to Switzerland to both private clinics and university hospitals. China is a future target. The number of these patients is on the rise.

There are an estimated 30,000 foreign patients who come to Switzerland every year for medical care, not counting people from the border areas. Medical treatment can cost SFr20,000 a day. This sum can be multiplied five to ten times, taking into account overnight stays in luxury hotels for those accompanying the patient, shopping and other generous expenses. Swiss Health encourages its members to increase their visibility through participation in medical conferences – for example in Saudi Arabia, Russia and Oman – and by collaborating with Swiss embassies, chambers of commerce, foreign health ministers and specialists in the health sector.

The Ars Medica Hospital Group, which has two

clinics in the Lugano area, is among those with patients from abroad. Foreign patients account for more than five per cent of all customers, a percentage that keeps rising compared with previous years.

It's difficult to draw up a league table because the pathologies treated are very diverse: from orthopaedic surgery to gynaecology, as well as obstetrics, neonatal medicine, surgery, internal medicine and oncology, not forgetting reproductive medicine and cosmetic surgery.

Ars Medica has also created a Centre for Preventive Medicine for foreign clients. The day-long health status assessment includes biological and genetic analysis, diagnostic imaging, functional testing, physiotherapy and dietary consultancy and a final report with personalised recommendations. The basic package – also presented in Russian on the group's website – costs around SFr3000.

Given spiralling health costs, public hospitals are also turning their attention to this lucrative source of income.

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