

## Doctors in South Korea walk out in strike

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### Warm-Up Questions:

What role do you think doctors play in society, and why is their job considered highly regarded?

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MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

In recent days, South Korea's **highly regarded** health care system has been in chaos. Thousands of trainee doctors have walked off the job in protest. And as NPR's Anthony Kuhn reports from Seoul, most have defied a government order to return to work by today.

ANTHONY KUHN, BYLINE: At a recent rally, doctors chanted a warning of a medical system collapse. They oppose the government's plan to increase medical school enrollments. South Korea has one of the lowest ratios of doctors to population of any developed economy, and the government says that the country's aging population needs more doctors. Recent polls show the public generally supports the increase, but the doctors say the country doesn't need more of them. They just need more pay and better working conditions. Outside Seoul's Severance Hospital, 69-year-old Na Yoon-hee says she came for treatment for her heart condition. But the emergency room **initially** turned her away. She says South Korea's doctors are already very well-paid.

NA YOON-HEE: Of course, it takes a lot of hard work and time to become a doctor. But it's a respected profession, and they have their pride. It seems wrong to do this by **holding people's lives hostage**.

KUHN: She says she's skeptical that training more doctors will help.

NA: (Through interpreter) They all want to go into **dermatology** or plastic surgery. I hear they don't want to be surgeons and work with **scalpels** because the work is harder and you have to study more.

KUHN: South Koreans are generally satisfied with their universal health insurance, which costs a fraction per person of that in the U.S. But hospitals outside Seoul are struggling to care for an aging and shrinking population, and **pediatricians, obstetricians** and emergency room physicians are in short supply. Ryu O. Hada is an emergency room trainee in Daejeon city. He says the legal work limit for South Korean doctors is 88 hours a week, but he's worked as many as 126 hours. He argues that the government wants to train more doctors not to lighten trainees' burdens but to staff new profit-making hospitals.

RYU O HADA: (Through interpreter) Hospitals are saving up money to continue building branches, expanding and creating franchises. It's **exploitation**. This is modern slavery.

KUHN: Ryu insists he's not **on strike**. He says he's submitted his resignation. And having worked on a farm, he has other job options.

RYU: (Through interpreter) I know how to make wine, grape juice, apple juice and apple jam, so I plan to go back to farming.

KUHN: Kim Jae-heon leads a civic group calling for more public health care. He notes that around 90% of South Korean hospitals are in the **private sector**. He argues that the way to get more doctors to work in remote areas and less **lucrative** medical fields is to build more public hospitals and pay doctors to work there. But he says both doctors groups and the government agree that that wouldn't be profitable for them.

KIM JAE-HEON: (Through interpreter) The fundamental issue is expanding public health care. But since the two sides are in agreement on opposing that, they are not considering it. Instead, they are fighting over the **peripheral** issue of increasing the number of doctors.

KUHN: Kim says the current standoff between the government and the doctors is too costly to go on for long. Then again, he says, neither side shows any sign of backing down. Anthony Kuhn, NPR News, Seoul.

### Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Highly regarded:** Held in great respect or esteem; considered very important or valuable.
2. **Initially:** At the beginning; at first.
3. **Holding (something) hostage:** Using something as leverage or a bargaining chip; manipulating situations or people by controlling something they need.
4. **Dermatology:** The branch of medicine dealing with the skin and its diseases.
5. **Scalpels:** Small and sharp surgical knives used for making incisions.
6. **Pediatricians:** Doctors who specialize in treating children.
7. **Obstetricians:** Doctors who specialize in childbirth and the care of women giving birth.
8. **Exploitation:** The act of using someone or something unfairly for one's own advantage.
9. **On strike:** Refusing to work as a form of protest, typically to gain better pay or working conditions.
10. **Private sector:** The part of the economy that is run by individuals and companies for profit, as opposed to the public sector, which is run by the government.
11. **Lucrative:** Producing a great deal of profit.
12. **Peripheral:** Relating to or situated on the edge or periphery of something; not central.

**Comprehension Questions:**

1. Why have thousands of trainee doctors in South Korea gone on strike?
2. What is the government's rationale for wanting to increase medical school enrollments?
3. What are the conditions and demands of the striking doctors according to the transcript?
4. How does Ryu O. Hada describe the working conditions for doctors in South Korea?
5. What solution does Kim Jae-heon propose for addressing the shortage of doctors in less lucrative medical fields and remote areas?

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Discuss the ethical implications of doctors going on strike, considering the potential impact on patients.
2. How can a balance be achieved between doctors' rights to fair pay and work conditions and the healthcare needs of the population?
3. Why do you think there is a disparity in the number of doctors working in urban vs. rural areas?
4. What are the pros and cons of having a health care system dominated by the private sector?
5. How can governments ensure that there are enough doctors in all specialties, including less lucrative ones like pediatrics and obstetrics?