Europe's financial crisis leads to suicide surge

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The harsh spending cuts introduced by European governments to tackle their crippling debt problems have not only pitched the region into recession—they are also being partly blamed for outbreaks of diseases not normally seen in Europe and a spike in suicides, according to new research.

Since the crisis first struck in 2008, state-run welfare and health services across Europe have seen their budgets cut, medical treatments rationed and unpopular measures such as hospital user fees introduced.

Those countries that have slashed public spending the hardest—namely Greece, Spain and Portugal—have fared the worst medically.

"Austerity measures haven't solved the economic problems and they have also created big health problems," said Martin McKee, a professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who led the research.

He said worsening health was driven not just by unemployment, but by the lack of a social welfare system to fall back on. "People need to have hope that the government will help them through this difficult time," he said.

The paper was published online Wednesday in a special series of the journal *Lancet*.

McKee said Greece in particular was struggling. Based on government data, he and colleagues found suicides rose by 40 percent in 2011 compared to the previous year. Last year, the country also reported an exponential rise in the number of HIV cases among drug users, due in part to addicts sharing contaminated syringes after needle exchange programs were dropped.

In recent years, Greece has also battled outbreaks of malaria, West Nile virus and dengue fever.

"These are not diseases we would normally expect to see in Europe," said Willem de Jonge, general director of Medecins Sans Frontieres in Greece.

In 2011, MSF helped Greece tackle a malaria outbreak that broke out after authorities scrapped spraying programs to kill mosquitoes.

"There's a strong willingness in the government to respond (to health problems) but the problem is a lack of resources," de Jonge said.

Outside Madrid's Hospital Clinico San Carlos, several patients grumbled about deteriorating medical care.

"The cutbacks are noticeable in many ways," said Mari Carmen Cervera, 54, an unemployed nurse. Cervera's mother was initially admitted to the hospital with a serious heart problem that required surgery. Cervera says her mother was discharged too early and had to be brought back when she had trouble breathing one night.

"While she was (hospitalized), she wasn't being properly washed by the nursing staff, so I had to do it myself," she said. "I personally think what has happened to my mother is a consequence of negligence and I am going to make an official complaint as soon as (she) is well enough to come home again."

Hans Kluge of the World Health Organization's European office, advised countries against radical health reforms during an economic crisis. "In every health system, there is fat to cut," he said, recommending countries start with straightforward measures such as buying more generic drugs or eliminating unnecessary hospital beds.

Still, McKee and colleagues found not all countries mired in debt are unhealthy. Despite massive losses in its banking sector, Iceland rejected a bailout deal prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. McKee and colleagues didn't find any bump in suicides and the population may even be healthier since it nearly went bankrupt—which could have been a result of global junk food chains pulling out of the country due to rising food costs.

Elsewhere, the researchers noted a drop in road accidents as more drivers opted for public transport. In turn, that has led to a shortage of organ donations and transplants, particularly in Spain and Ireland.