

Venezuelan hospitals say shortages creating emergency

August 19 2014

Private hospitals and clinics reeling from the shortages that have hit Venezuela urged President Nicolas Maduro on Tuesday to declare a humanitarian emergency over a lack of medicine and supplies.

"We ask the national executive to declare a humanitarian emergency in the ([health](#)) sector in the face of the worsening shortages and irregular delivery of supplies, medicine, surgical materials, [medical equipment](#) and reserve supplies," said Carlos Rosales, head of the Venezuelan Association of Clinics and Hospitals (AVCH).

Venezuela imports 90 percent of its health supplies, and the sector has been hit hard by the strict foreign currency controls launched by late socialist president Hugo Chavez and continued by Maduro.

Despite being officially exempt from the controls—which have opened a chasm between the official and black-market exchange rates—medical and health supplies have been affected by the same mass shortages that have hit the rest of the economy.

The problem is particularly acute for highly specialized items.

"It's urgent for the government to take decisions at the highest level to allow sufficient currency liquidity and import processes," Rosales told a press conference.

He said at least 20 medical specialties had been "seriously affected,"

including heart and cancer specialists, orthopedists, pediatricians and brain surgeons.

The affected supplies range from hi-tech materials such as heart surgery equipment and anaesthesia—forcing doctors to delay patients' operations—to basic items like gloves and suture thread.

"This puts sick human beings' lives and health at risk," said Rosales.

For cancer patients, the chances of survival were "seriously reduced" by the lack of specialized medicine and equipment, he said.

The AVCH said the problem was affecting public and private hospitals alike.

Importers estimate they are only able to access 40 percent of the required medicine and 15 percent of the required [medical supplies](#).

Health Minister Francisco Armada acknowledged Monday that shortages had affected "one group of medications," and said his staff was working with the agency in charge of currency controls to address the problem.

The Venezuelan government has racked up debts of \$350 million with foreign medical supply companies and \$900,000 with pharmaceutical firms, according to health care industry estimates.

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