

In the late 1990s, UNICEF and the Armenian Government launched a program that aimed at eliminating iodine deficiency. In 2005, an epidemiological research was held at 30 schools, among 911 children (eight-ten-year-olds). It showed that Armenia overcame the problem of iodine deficiency among the population by means of salt. "The research showed that 97 percent of our households use iodinated salt, and the limit is 90 percent, and if the index is more than 90, it means that we have excellent results," says Mihran Hakobyan, an employee of the UNICEF Healthcare Department. After all, in August 2006, Armenia was recognized as a country that had overcome iodine deficiency by UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Council for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorder. Zemfira Ghazaryan pointed out that even though the government solves the iodization problem by means of iodizing table salt, in the Lori region 5 in 10 people have thyroid gland problems, especially women. "And queues to endocrinologists are not getting shorter," she says. Along with the growth of endocrine diseases, a low level of awareness is observed among the population. Many people do not know that lack of iodine in the body must be compensated for by properly using iodized table salt. Satik Gevorgyan, a resident of Sisian, does not even know why iodized salt should be used, although she suspects she has goiter: "I don't even know that there is no iodine in our water and that it can cause goiter. One must be a doctor to know those things." Chief endocrinologist of Lori region Flora Elizbaryan also believes the fact that thyroid gland function abnormalities are widely spread in Armenia is related to improper use of table salt by the population. "Is our population aware that iodine is destroyed in the salt under sunlight, do they know that salt must be kept in a dry and closed container, away from the sun to prevent it from going bad? Do our women know that salt must be added to meals in the last place? All this is very important, I think the increase in the number of diseases is immediately related to these problems," she says. The UNICEF representative, referring to the awareness stage of the project on overcoming iodine deficiency, says that it was not realistic to personally inform all the residents: "We used all the medical and educational institutions to make it possible to raise awareness. Of course, we cannot say whether or not they effectively carried out the awareness-raising activities, but that is another issue." "One way or the other, now salt has such a quality that if a person uses it in normal amounts, the lack of iodine is compensated for," he adds. Toromanyan, admitting all this, also points out that the problem of thyroid gland diseases will always be present in Armenia: "We really have a problem, and we always will, because we are an endemic zone." As proof of the above words, the "Towards healthy motherhood" project was carried out in Goris in 2007 by the "Goris Women's Center" NGO. The NGO used the grant in the amount of 3.7 million dram (about \$10,000) to organize examination of the thyroid gland and diagnostics for 15-year-old girls in Goris and four villages of the Goris region. More than 140 girls were examined at the first stage of examination, of whom 43 (about 30 percent) were found to have hormonal abnormalities. However, the Ministry of Health, where examination data had been sent, did a new examination and found different data. "Only 8 percent of those who underwent examination organized by the NGO were found to have hormonal abnormalities, (11 out of 140 girls who had been examined). Of the 29 girls who underwent medical examination on the spot, only two had clinical signs of thyroid function abnormality," stated the Ministry. Ekaterina Hayrapetyan, Head of the Laboratory of "Goris Medical Center" CJSC, was one of the doctors of the examination (from "Goris Medical Center" CJSC). She says that the Ministry of Health has not taken their study seriously: "Although we detected quite a high percentage of cases against the general background, the Ministry of Health gave us a hostile reception. It is clear: they will deny it, because 'if there is no problem, there is no pain in the neck.'" The head of the Goris Laboratory says that they have examined the hypophysis gland (controlling growth). If the hypophysis hormone is abnormal, the others will inevitably have abnormalities as well. Teenage girls will become mothers in the future, and the problem may turn into sterility. "Our aim was to have them accept the project and get the state to test the hypophysis gland," Hayrapetyan says. "It would be desirable that the examination be financed by the state, it costs 9,000 drams (about 24 dollars)," endocrine-surgeon Kurenkov says. "In medicine prevention is cheaper than treatment. I think the government should stretch a helping hand and finance thyroid gland surgeries as well, because those are among the most expensive surgeries." In Yerevan, nodular endemic goiter surgery costs 450,000 drams (about 1,200 dollars), in Goris – 100,000 drams (\$270). According to Kurenkov, "for residents of Goris region 100,000 drams is also a large sum of money, let alone 450,000 drams." "There are people for whom 1,000 drams (about \$3) is also a large sum of money, but those people do not belong to any of the socially vulnerable groups, defined by the state and cannot get state-financed treatment," the endocrine surgeon says. Head of the "Goris Women's Center" NGO Lena Hovsepyan says that another reason why the Ministry of Health was opposed to their project is that the project had not been preliminarily coordinated with the Ministry (this has been written in official letter from Ministry of Health). "We really fought for it, but we have come up to a wall, on which the Ministry of Health wrote that the shortage of iodine in the country has been overcome. But overcoming the shortage of iodine does not mean overcoming the diseases that were caused by iodine deficiency in the past 15 years," Hovsepyan stresses. This investigation is done with support from the Danish Association for Investigative Journalism / Scoop (www.i-scoop.org).