

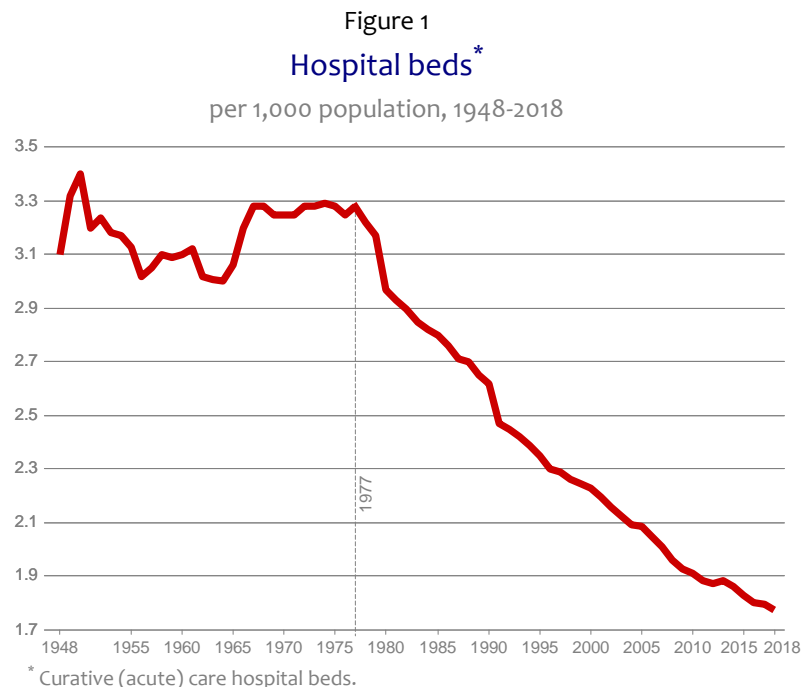
When Israel's "everything will be ok" mindset hits the fan

by
Dan Ben-David

For lack of an official slogan, Israel's national motto might as well have been the ubiquitous "everything will be ok." It's the common Israeli rebuttal, and the underlying principle, that has guided the country's policy-makers for decades.

This is a country that sent its children to the biggest war since its independence with empty storerooms, putting its faith on their resourcefulness to pull us out of the Yom Kippur War. We paid an enormous price. This is a country that sent its medical teams to war with empty storerooms against the most dangerous virus in Israel's history, assuming that everything will be ok because we Israelis are more ingenious at making do than most. We'll only know the final price of this approach in the future. This is a country that gives a third world education to roughly half of its children – who also belong to its fastest growing population groups – and believes that everything will be ok when they grow up. So what if reality (in Israel and in the rest of the world) is that the ability to overcome a poor education diminishes with age? Everything will be ok.

This is a country that built hospitals and managed to add hospital beds at the exponentially increasing rate of its population during the first decades after independence. This same country lost its way in recent decades and enabled a free fall in the number of hospital beds per capita (Figure 1). Since the 1970s, the number of unoccupied hospital beds per capita has fallen to the bottom of the developed world (Figure 2).



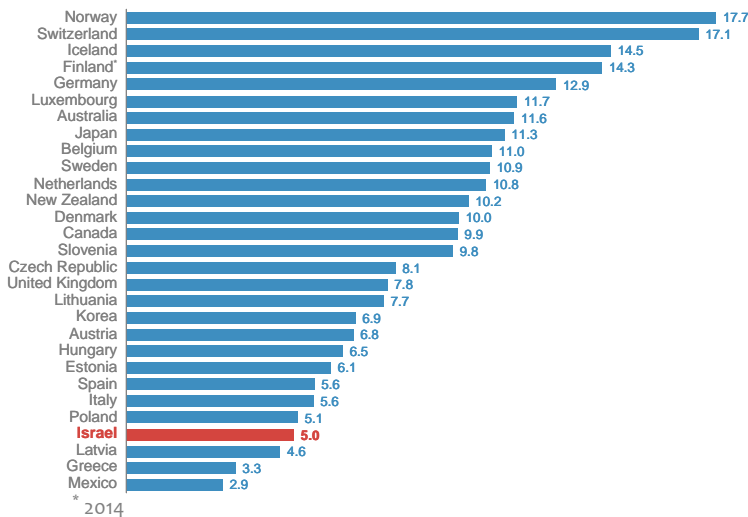
Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institute and Tel Aviv University
Data: Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics and Health Ministry

Israel’s multi-year neglect of its health system did not just culminate in empty warehouses for its medical staffs but reached the medical staffs themselves. Today, the number of practicing nurses per capita in Israel is one of the lowest in the West (Figure 3a). And when we look ahead, the number of nursing graduates per capita is also near the bottom of the developed world (Figure 3b) – with all that this suggests about the need to rehabilitate the system.

It still has not dawned on the “everything will be ok” country that when long run trajectories are neglected, they will ultimately blow up in our face. When

Figure 3a
Practicing nurses

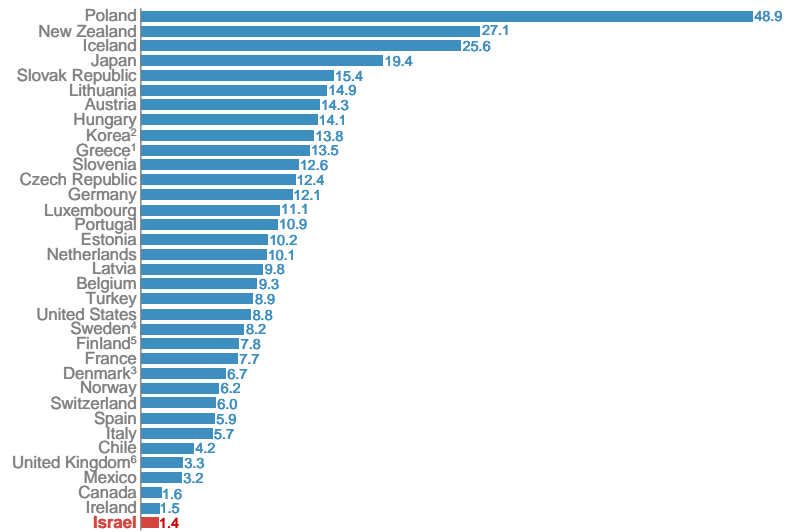
per 1,000 population, averages for 2016-2018



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: OECD

Figure 2
Unoccupied hospital beds*

per 10,000 population, averages for 2016-2017



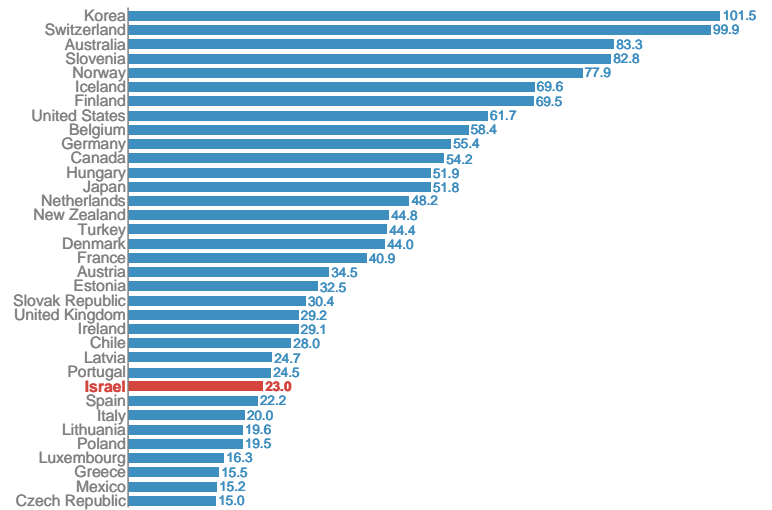
* Curative (acute) care hospital beds per 10,000 population times the percent of unavailble beds.

¹ 2013, ² 2003, ³ 2001, ⁴ 1996, ⁵ 1995, ⁶ using 2010 occupancy rates

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: OECD

Figure 3b
Nursing graduates

per 100,000 population, averages for 2016-2018

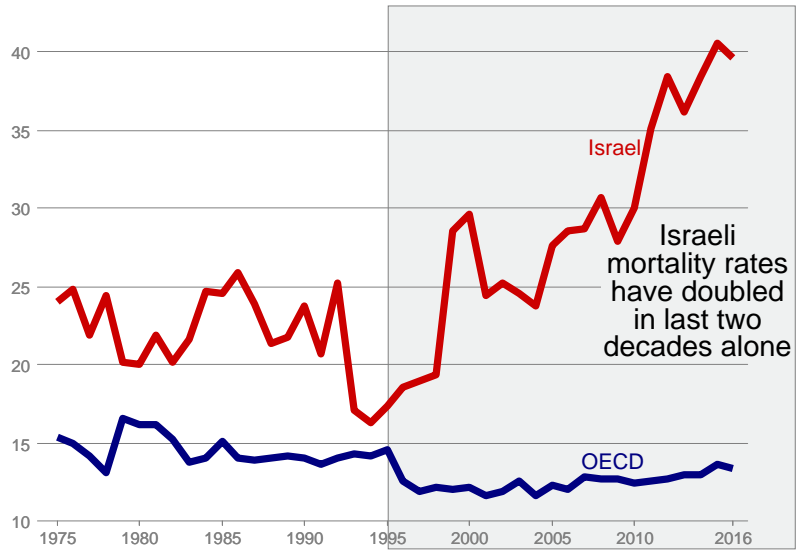


hospital congestion overflows repeatedly into corridors and dining areas, and when there is a severe lack in medical personnel and of equipment for them, this carries a price. For example, the share of Israelis dying from infectious diseases doubled over the past two decades (Figure 4). No other developed country has witnessed anything approaching this death rate.

The unparalleled jump in Israeli mortality rates from infectious diseases – even before the current epidemic – catapulted Israel to the top of the developed world. We’re not just leading the list. The share of Israelis dying annually from infectious diseases is 73% (!) higher than the second place country (Figure 5). To provide some perspective of this debacle’s magnitude: between 4,000 to 6,000 Israelis die each year from infectious diseases (according to the national comptroller’s office). This compares with 250-350 people killed annually on Israel’s roads.

This is a nation that sees the writing on the wall year after year, and yet, it continues to run under the omnipresent assumption that everything will be ok. It

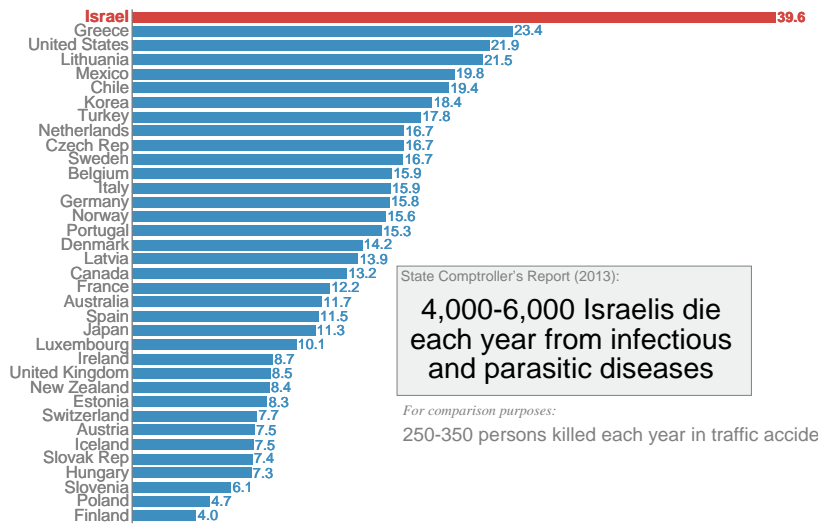
Figure 4
Deaths from infectious and parasitic diseases
per 100,000 population *, 1975-2016



* Mortality rates from infectious and parasitic diseases adjusted by the ratio of standardized population to actual population. OECD average does not include Israel..

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: OECD

Figure 5
Deaths from infectious and parasitic diseases
per 100,000 population *, average for 2014-2016



State Comptroller's Report (2013):
4,000-6,000 Israelis die each year from infectious and parasitic diseases

For comparison purposes:
250-350 persons killed each year in traffic accidents

* Mortality rates from infectious and parasitic diseases adjusted by the ratio of standardized population to actual population.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University
Data: OECD

even leaves in office those responsible for the fiascoes. This is not something happening only in healthcare but a phenomenon occurring in one realm after another. While the public discourse is being led astray by the placing of trifle issues at the top of the agenda, Israel is proceeding methodically along trajectories that are clearly unsustainable – with all that this implies for the future of the country.

This is a country that exempts a fifth of its children from studying a complete core curriculum – behavior considered illegal in every other developed country – because everything will be ok. As more and more Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) understand the importance of higher education and embark on the path to academic studies, their dreams crash into the wall of reality when most have to drop out – more than half (53%) of Haredi women and more than three-quarters (76%) of Haredi men, according to the national comptroller's office – because the education that they received in their schools was the worst in the West.

This is a nation that enables its Haredi population, with 7.1 children per family on average (compared to the 3.1 national average), to disobey laws applying to the rest of the population, because everything will be ok. So what if the leaders of that society demand the right to obstruct their own children's future – and endanger the future of us all when in just two generations half of Israel's children will be Haredim (according to Central Bureau of Statistics forecasts) lacking the ability to become physicians, engineers, architects, physicists and all the other occupations that a modern country must have? But don't worry, everything will be ok.

Who will pay taxes in the future that their leadership is preparing for them, and that our sycophantic leadership is preparing for us all? Already today, 92% of Israel's entire income tax burden falls on the shoulders of just 20% of the population, a steadily rising burden from the 83% of a decade and a half ago. When a country that pressures its army to lie and fabricate data on the military conscription of Haredim because the politicians are unwilling to impose on them what is required from the remaining Jewish population, don't worry, everything will be ok. The children of the future minority will undoubtedly rush to the front lines and put their lives on the line to protect all the rest who refuse to do so.

When a part of society is allowed to serially break education and conscription laws, then it should not come as a surprise when lifestyles of law-breaking evolve into violation of health regulations. So what if the rest of us are forced into a nation-wide clampdown to contain the virus – what does this have to do with them? Israel’s hospitals are rapidly filling up with Haredim infected by the virus, so good luck to your grandmother (and to you) if you get infected. Everything will be ok.

Looking ahead, the “everything will be ok” syndrome reaches far beyond the Haredim. This is a nation that has been choosing, decade after decade, a leadership that is taking it down an exceptionally steady path towards a one-state solution with our neighbors, avoiding the fact that Israel will not be able to remain both democratic and the home of the Jewish people. And if we’re already talking about democracy, it is becoming clear that many don’t understand the word or internalize the concept. This is a country with a justice minister who excoriates the justice system that he heads, with a speaker of the Knesset who violates Supreme Court rulings, and with a prime minister – the nation’s leader – who constantly and vehemently disparages his nation’s legal and law enforcement systems, not to mention his literal demonization of all who oppose his ways.

As if this were not enough, politicians – whose primary flag in the recent elections, if not their only one, was the intent to apply laws to prime ministers similar to those currently in place: prohibiting persons facing indictments to become cabinet ministers – are now engaged in a race with one another to enter the new government before the door shuts. So what if this comes at the price of leaving in place a failed health minister who let the system deteriorate for years? Everything will be ok. So what if this means naming a new speaker of the Knesset who actively urged his predecessor to disobey supreme court rulings? And so what if the new government will be led by a person currently facing trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust who has tried – and continues to try – to take control of the free press, democracy’s watchdog, and of the enforcement and legal institutions directly responsible for defending democracy?

Everything will be ok? No it will not! There’s a limit to everything.

If the so-called “natural partners” at the helm of the Israeli ship for the better part of the past half century have been leading the country steadily towards that huge iceberg ahead, don’t be surprised if your children decide to jump ship while they still can. For each Israeli with an academic degree returning to Israel, almost three times as many (2.8) such persons left in 2014. By 2018, the number of emigrants had surpassed the 4 person mark per returnee – and all this occurred before the recent political fireworks in Israel. Within just one decade, the ratio of Israeli physicians abroad to those in Israel jumped by 50%.

The actual natural partners are the majority within the Right and Left, among the secular, religious and Haredim – and they include the Arab-Israelis from whom a non-negligible number are selflessly treating Jewish patients today, because this is the only country that we all have. Israel’s true natural partners are those who know deep down inside that if we continue like this, then everything here will not be ok.

It is possible to do things differently. At the time of this writing, the new government has not yet been finalized or sworn in. To those politicians rushing to join the government, please think again. The correct measures for dealing with the coronavirus can, and should be, supported even from the opposition. It won’t be the coronavirus that will bring down Israel but rather the “everything will be ok” attitude that has enabled generations of leaders to play with fire and endanger the physical existence of the only Jewish home we’ve had in 2,000 years. Each camp has its demagogues and loonies. The time has come to keep them away from the television screens and from governments that are literally demolishing the future that so many of our parents, siblings and children have given their lives for.

Wake up! It’s not ok – but it’s still not too late to change course.