

## **The Nursing Health Workforce at the Center of Preparedness**

SPEECH - MEP Vytenis Andriukaitis

Dear colleagues,

It's a real pleasure to be here today to discuss a topic that is crucial for the future of healthcare: "The Nursing Health Workforce at the Center of Preparedness." In any crisis, healthcare systems rely heavily on their workforce, and nurses are at the core of this response. Unfortunately, our healthcare systems have often overlooked one of their most valuable assets—nurses. Today, I want to emphasize why we must place nursing at the center of health system preparedness and how we can ensure our workforce is ready for the challenges ahead.

Nurses make up the largest group of healthcare professionals in Europe. They are on the frontlines, from primary care to emergency response, caring for patients, managing crises, and protecting public health. Their role goes beyond daily care—they are essential in preventing the spread of diseases, managing large-scale emergencies, and guiding patients through recovery. Nurses also play a crucial role in caring for children and supporting maternity and pregnancy. However, global health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed significant gaps in our preparedness, particularly in workforce readiness.

The nursing shortage across the EU is undeniable—it's a ticking time bomb. The biggest challenges include poor working conditions, low salaries, and especially the overwhelming demands in intensive care departments.

That's why, for all EU governments, the top priority must be planning for healthcare nurses: ensuring high-quality education, making higher investments,

and guaranteeing equal pay for equal work across all Member States. Otherwise, we risk significant losses and disparities in care across some Member States.

The pandemic underscored the need for a strong, resilient, and well-trained nursing workforce. While nurses stepped up to the challenge, many faced major obstacles, including a lack of personal protective equipment, overwhelming patient loads, and significant mental health strains. If we are to be adequately prepared for future crises, nurses must not only be equipped to respond but must be central to the overall preparedness strategy.

**To build a sustainable nursing workforce, we must focus on three key areas:**

**1. Training and Education:** Nurses need specialized training that prepares them for emergency response, disaster management, and evolving healthcare needs. This includes not only clinical expertise but also crisis management and public health strategies. Our education systems must be flexible and forward-thinking, ready to equip nurses for both routine care and large-scale health threats. We should also empower nurses with expanded competencies, such as allowing them to take on roles traditionally filled by family doctors when appropriate. This would require new payment mechanisms to be established.

**2. Workforce Sustainability:** The nursing shortage is a growing issue. By 2030, the World Health Organization predicts a global shortage of nearly 18 million health workers, with nurses bearing the brunt. To address this, we must implement policies that attract, retain, and support nurses—offering fair compensation, safe working conditions, and mental and physical health support. A sustainable workforce is essential for long-term preparedness. We must also ensure and guarantee nurses' continuing professional development.

**3. Mental Health and Resilience:** Nurses face significant emotional and psychological stress, especially during crises. It is critical that mental health support becomes a priority. A system of care—focused on stress management, peer support, and access to mental health resources—will help build resilience, ensuring that nurses are equipped to respond effectively in times of crisis.

At the European level, organizations like ESNO (European Specialist Nurses Organization) play a vital role in advocating for highly educated and specialized nursing, ensuring that the profession is integrated into healthcare preparedness strategies, and promoting a stronger role and leadership for nurses. Through collaboration with policymakers, ESNO is driving policies that place nursing at the center of health system planning.

The work of health-focused Members of the European Parliament is equally important. By aligning with organizations like ESNO, we ensure that nursing perspectives shape the policies that define healthcare systems and preparedness efforts.

In conclusion, the future of healthcare depends on a strong, resilient nursing workforce. If we want a healthcare system that is ready for the challenges of tomorrow, we must invest in nursing today. By focusing on training, workforce sustainability, and mental health support, we can ensure that nurses are not just responders to crises but leaders in preparedness.

And remember, nurses are the backbone of healthcare—so let's make sure we're not the ones who break it by failing to take care of them.

Thank you!

MEP Vytenis Andriukaitis.

# Shaping the Future of Healthcare: Building a Sustainable Paradigm for Nursing and Beyond

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