

Key Note Speech MEP Andras Kulja

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Esteemed Colleagues and Guest,



First, Thank you very much for the kind invitation.

It is truly a privilege to be here today, and I warmly greet all participants of this distinguished conference. I come to you not only as a policymaker, but also as someone who has worked on the frontline of care—as a surgeon, and as someone deeply committed to public health and health literacy.

In recent years, healthcare has moved to the centre of our public and political focus like never before. The COVID-19 pandemic didn't create these challenges—it simply illuminated what was already there. It revealed long-standing vulnerabilities in our systems, such as:

- fragile medical supply chains,
- workforce shortages,
- fragmented care pathways,
- and limited crisis response capacity.

Importantly, these weaknesses are not isolated national issues. They are shared European challenges—and they demand coordinated, collective responses at the EU level.

In response to these systemic gaps, I strongly support two key EU policy initiatives: the proposed Critical Medicines Act and the Parliamentary Report on Healthcare Workforce Shortages. These initiatives are not simply technocratic instruments—they are essential EU level policy tools to protect people's access to care.

The Critical Medicines Act will help ensure that essential therapies remain available and accessible to patients in need, even during crises or disruptions. It is about strategic preparedness, but more fundamentally, it is about delivering on the promise that no European should be left without the medicines they require.

Similarly, the workforce report goes far beyond summarizing staffing problems—it is the beginning of a European workforce strategy. A strategy that recognises the deep, systemic shortages that make it increasingly difficult for citizens—especially in rural or underserved regions—to access healthcare when they need it. Addressing this issue is not optional. Without an adequately staffed, well-distributed, and well-supported workforce, we cannot deliver the health outcomes our societies expect and deserve.

The core of any modern healthcare system should be patient-centred care. But to truly put patients first, we also need to focus on those who care for them. That means being caregiver-centred, too.

Nurses—and especially specialist nurses—are essential. They are the backbone of continuous, reliable care. Their roles are changing, their responsibilities are growing, and it's time we fully recognise and support this important shift.

We have to be honest: in many countries, the skills and contributions of specialist nurses still don't get the recognition they deserve. Working conditions are often demanding, opportunities to move forward in their careers are limited, and their mental and physical wellbeing is under real pressure.

The European Commission reports that Europe is already facing a shortage of 1.2 million nurses, doctors, and midwives. This isn't just a future crisis—it's happening now. Hospitals are finding it difficult to staff shifts, many communities lack adequate home care services, and patients are experiencing increasingly long waiting lists for treatment.

To reverse this, we need a more strategic, sustainable approach to workforce planning—one that values retention as much as recruitment, and wellbeing as much as efficiency. This includes:

- Expanding specialist education opportunities that allow nurses to deepen their knowledge and advance their careers
- Improving working environments that are safe and professionally supportive
- Providing more dynamic and flexible shift structures that protect rest and better work-life balance
- Developing structured mentorship pathways, where experienced nurses can support and inspire the next generation

However, education without recognition is not enough. We must create systems that actively integrate specialist nurses into leadership roles in:

- clinical care,
- in education and training,
- in health innovation,
- and in guiding the digital and green transition of our healthcare sector.

Looking ahead to the digital transformation of health systems, and especially with the implementation of the European Health Data Space (EHDS), we must ensure that nurses are not left on the sidelines. They must be equipped with the digital literacy required to engage meaningfully with real-world data. And they must be given the opportunity to shape how that data is used:

- to inform care,
- to evaluate outcomes,
- and to make policies more responsive.

The future of healthcare in Europe will not be built on technology alone. It will be built on the ability of our systems to adapt to:

- chronic diseases,
- the aging population

- and rising public needs.

Specialist nurses will be essential in this process. From managing cardiovascular disease and cancer, to supporting neurological and mental health care, they are often best positioned to guide patients across complex, long-term treatment pathways.

We also need their expertise in prevention and early detection. Many of the leading causes of death in Europe—heart disease, stroke, cancer—can be mitigated through timely intervention. Specialist nurses can:

- lead outreach initiatives,
- run education programmes,
- and coordinate public health campaigns in ways that are targeted, effective, and rooted in patient trust.

Speaking of trust.

It is something that we cannot take for granted these days. The rise of populist and anti-science rhetoric is weakening public confidence in the very foundations of modern healthcare and the integrity of democratic public institutions. This is deeply concerning. The consequences are not abstract—they are visible in declining vaccination rates, in misinformation spreading, and unnecessary deaths.

In this context, nurses are one of our most valuable assets. Consistently ranked as the most trusted health professionals, they can help rebuild confidence—not through argument, but through presence, empathy, and engagement. YOU (!) are uniquely able to translate science into care, and care into trust.

That is why I believe health education must start early—in schools, in communities, and across public life. Specialist nurses should be empowered to take part in these efforts, equipping children and families with knowledge and awareness from a young age.

Equally, we must not overlook one of the most pressing and complex challenges facing our societies today: the growing mental health crisis, especially among younger generations. Anxiety, loneliness, emotional hardship: these are the daily realities for many young people across Europe. The response must be systemic and strategic. We need a European mental health strategy, and within that, a clear role for specialist nurses as part of community-based mental health care teams. YOUR involvement can:

- improve access,
- reduce stigma
- and support more continuous, person-centred care.

As we reflect on these challenges and opportunities, one thing becomes clear:

- Europe stands at critical crossroads.
- Geopolitical shifts, demographic pressure, and economic transformation are reshaping how we think about public investment.

But here is the simple truth:

Investing in healthcare is investing in Europe's future. The return is not just in saved lives—it is in a stronger, more resilient, and more socially cohesive Union.

Whether we are tackling antimicrobial resistance, promoting sustainable care practices, or building systems capable of adapting to climate and digital change—specialist nurses must be part of the solution. Their skills, their leadership, and their grounded understanding of patients' needs are essential.

In the European Parliament, and particularly in the newly formed SANT Committee on Public Health, I am committed to ensuring that our approach is integrated, science-based, and guided by those who deliver care every day. That means listening to nurses, involving you in policy, and recognising your rightful place in the future of healthcare.

Closing remarks

I am deeply grateful to be here with you today—not just to speak, but to listen and to learn. Because what we need now is not just better policy—but shared understanding and shared action. Together, we can build a healthcare system that is worthy of the people who work in it, and the people it serves.

Thank you, Andras.

MEP Andras Kulja, Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), vice chair, Committee on the Environment, Climate and Food Safety, member of the Committee on Public Health and substitute to the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and Delegation for relations with the Korean Peninsula