

Highlights from Dirk Van der Steen, European Commission DG SANTE

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1. Urgency of Health Workforce Challenges

- Nurses around the world and in Europe play a crucial role in ensuring patients' recovery and wellbeing, accompanying and selflessly taking care of patients in some of the most vulnerable moments of their life.
- The European Commission is deeply committed to helping Member States tackle pressing health workforce challenges that threaten the sustainability of our health systems. To begin with, we must grasp the true magnitude of the challenge we are facing.
- The 2024 *Health at a Glance: Europe* report highlights an alarming shortage of **1.2 million doctors, nurses, and midwives across the EU**.
- In 2022, according to **Eurostat** the EU average was 7.6 nurses per 1,000 inhabitants, hiding stark disparities (0.9–13 nurses per 1,000) and significant geographic inequalities within countries.
- The ageing population and ageing health workforce will increase demand for care, yet more than half of EU countries report declining interest in nursing careers.
- It is crucial to understand the **causes of declining interest in nursing careers** among younger generations, while also addressing the reasons why current nurses may consider **leaving the profession**.
- Efforts must focus both on enhancing the **attractiveness of the nursing profession and on retaining experienced nurses**. This requires clear career pathways, improved working conditions, greater opportunities for professional growth and skills development, including digital competencies, and a supportive and safe work environment that values and sustains the nursing workforce.
- Many countries have worked on reforms to expand **advanced practice nurse roles**, extend prescribing rights, support task sharing, and strengthen nurses' roles in health promotion and disease prevention.
- These reforms must be paired with modernised *nursing education*, including university-integrated curricula, new modules in digital health, public health, and advanced clinical practice, and a stronger focus on **nursing science research** as a driver of professional development and innovation.

2. EU Support for Member States

- Strengthening the workforce is central to building resilient health systems, a cornerstone of the European Health Union, and a key priority in Commissioner Várhelyi's **Mission Letter on Health and Animal Welfare**.
- The EU provides **comprehensive support to Member States** to address workforce challenges and strengthen health systems, combining technical assistance, policy guidance, and targeted funding.

- Ongoing EU projects on the health workforce create opportunities for collaboration, learning, and innovation. In many cases through EU projects and initiatives countries have found additional support contributing to the development and implementation of health workforce national policies
- The centre piece of our efforts to help Member States address shortages of nurses is an important cooperation with the WHO EURO . The **Nursing Action** was conceived by the European Commission, in partnership with WHO Europe, to support Member States in improving their retention and recruitment strategies addressing nurse shortages, which affect many countries in Europe.
- This action in which WHO Europe is directly collaborating with European nurses' associations and social partners will be providing **mentoring programmes** that will be piloted across EU countries considering different healthcare organisations, workforce **impact assessments**, strategies for health and wellbeing, and more.
- Since the official launch event of the action in January 2025, with the high involvement of the European Commission and WHO and the generous hospitality of the Polish Presidency, progress has continued effectively through **bilateral dialogues** with national representatives and stakeholders and assessments focused on nurse retention and recruitment.
- We are encouraged by the growing interest from countries, as well as the increasing number of Member States joining and engaging in the Nursing Action. The Commission has high expectations for this initiative and looks forward to seeing concrete results and solutions that will benefit all Member States.
- We also support Member States through the action on **health workforce planning** under the Member States-led initiative **Joint Action Heroes**. Planning is fundamental to protect health systems from sudden crises, but also long-term pressures. Therefore,. At the same time, accurate planning is beneficial for achieving balanced workloads for health workers.
- Skills development also remains a priority,. The EU funds a multi-stakeholder **Pact for Skills partnership** in healthcare addressing digital and green skills in healthcare. This initiative, called BeWell, will deliver a skills strategy for health workers in the coming months.
- Furthermore, the **seven EU4Health-funded training projects** focus on strengthening digital skills for healthcare professionals, and all of them include **modules dedicated to nurses** and training in at least 5 Member States. Most of courses provide for microcredentials.
- Examples include training for oncology nurses in cancer care, module specifically dedicated to nurses, focusing on their role in infection prevention and control and antimicrobial, leadership and teamwork in nursing, patient triage based on digital tools, digital skills in everyday in-patient care and evidence-based nursing by using AI.
- Nurses are frontline heroes during crises, but their own **mental health needs** cannot be overlooked. On October 10 WHO launched the report of the **Mental Health of Nurses and Doctors survey** conducted by WHO/Europe with support from the European Commission, as part of the **Comprehensive approach to Mental Health**.

- It was the largest mental health survey of its kind, with over 90 000 responses from 29 countries, including all 27 European Union members, plus Iceland and Norway
- Results indicate **high prevalence of depression and low job satisfaction**, especially among nurses. This highlights the need to integrate mental health support into workforce policies
- Finally, the **Expert Group on Health Systems Performance Assessment (HSPA)** serves as a valuable forum for Member States and international partners to share experiences and develop evidence-based reforms. The group is currently mapping safe **staffing approaches** across EU countries, and this work will help inform also the ongoing Nursing Action, which is conducting a complementary mapping focused specifically on nursing, taking into account the different roles and responsibilities of nurses across health systems.
- Beyond these initiatives, the Commission offers **country-specific support**, providing policy recommendations within the framework of the **European Semester**, technical assistance through the **Technical Support Instrument**, and crucial funding via the **Recovery and Resilience Plans**, as well as the **Cohesion Policy funds**.
- Reforms and investments supported by EU funds include measures to strengthen the role of nurses in primary care, improve working conditions, enhance training, upskilling, and reskilling opportunities across the profession. For example they strengthen the network of community nurses in Austria, expand roles of nurses in Estonia or Poland, provide training to nurses in Spain or Italy.

3. Improving Working Conditions and Job Quality

- Finally, the Commission also works on number of horizontal initiatives to improve working conditions in general. This work links to our social acquis, aligning initiatives with standards set by various directives; Let me name a few examples.
- The forthcoming **Quality Jobs Roadmap** will set the way forward to improve quality of jobs in Europe calling for joint efforts of all the key actors. As announced in the State of the Union speech, the **Quality Jobs Act** will exploit the potential of legislative measures in this area.
- Improving working conditions also comes across several principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. The renewed action plan to implement the Pillar will be proposed by the Commission by the end of 2025.
- Commission also supports **social dialogue** to ensure more central role of social partners in improving working conditions and protecting workers in the health sector.

Looking forward to receiving the report from the event.