

Words of MEP Andras Kulja

4 November 2025

**Dear Participants,
Dear Colleagues,**

First, let me express my sincere gratitude for the invitation to open this pivotal event. As many of you know, this topic is very close to my heart.

Coming from Hungary, the burning issue of healthcare workforce shortages is felt every day — by patients, physicians, nurses, and all other healthcare professionals. Waiting lists are long, extra working hours and night shifts are increasing, and the pressure on many healthcare institutions has already reached an unsustainable level.

This particularly affects underserved and rural regions. With less developed healthcare infrastructure, and with less attractive working and living conditions for physicians and nurses, rural hospitals and facilities face enormous workforce shortages. In many cases, this creates obstacles to ensuring continuity of care that are incredibly difficult to resolve.

I. SO LET ME BEGIN BY SAYING THIS CLEARLY: THOSE WHO ARE WORKING UNDER SUCH ENORMOUS PRESSURE IN PATIENT CARE ARE TRUE HEROES.

Without their dedication and tireless effort to help others, we would not stand a chance of ensuring a healthier life for our citizens.

As policymakers, our responsibility is to help relieve this pressure. We must work on flexible, family-friendly working models. We must establish robust national and EU-level recruitment and retention programmes. We must reduce dependency on non-EU workers. And we must support Eastern Europe and smaller Member States that are particularly affected by brain drain.

At the same time, the healthcare sector is evolving rapidly — and we must adapt. AI, digitalization, modern personalised biotechnological solutions, and advanced data governance are already transforming care delivery, and this transformation will only accelerate.

I want to emphasize that these innovations will not replace a well-trained workforce. Instead, they require us to help physicians, nurses, and other professionals develop literacy in digital tools, AI, biotechnology, and data management. This must be reflected in healthcare and nursing curricula, and lifelong upskilling must become the norm to ensure that the workforce remains equipped with up-to-date knowledge.

We must also ensure that medical and nursing professionals are involved in designing these new digital solutions, so they truly serve their intended purpose and address real patient needs.

II. TRAINING AND RETAINING MORE HEALTHCARE WORKERS IS FUNDAMENTAL — BUT NOT ENOUGH.

Task-sharing is another important approach, already well-established in many Member States. With aging populations and advancing treatments, long-term care has become a central pillar of societal well-being. To meet these needs, we must empower non-physician professionals — specialist nurses, pharmacists, and others — to take on broader roles in long-term care and patient management.

To make this happen, we need clear national regulations, fair reimbursement models, and appropriate training for those willing to step up, upskill, and take on new responsibilities.

We have also seen in the latest WHO report that the burden on doctors and nurses is not only physical and cognitive — it is profoundly psychological. The prevalence of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts among them is alarming. This is a clear call for us to improve working conditions.

One of the main drivers of this mental-health strain is the lack of work-life balance, driven by excessive working hours and night shifts. We — as policymakers — must facilitate flexible scheduling, family-friendly planning, and improved shift structures to guarantee work-life balance for all. We must also develop national and EU-level initiatives that provide timely mental-health support and burnout prevention.

III. THIS IS ALSO ESSENTIAL IF WE WANT TO MAKE THESE PROFESSIONS ATTRACTIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE.

Whether we talk about the field of medicine or nursing, early career professionals across Europe are in an especially difficult position — coping with heavy workloads and emotional pressures, while engaging in training, career development, family planning, and maintaining personal well-being.

IV. WE MUST RECOGNISE THAT DIFFERENT GENERATIONS HAVE DIFFERENT PREFERENCES AND EXPECTATIONS.

That is why we need open dialogue with healthcare workers and with professional organisations. Their participation in policymaking is key to ensuring science-based and needs-based reforms. All relevant stakeholders must be part of this conversation so that together we can develop sustainable short- and long-term solutions.

V. LET ME HIGHLIGHT ONE OF THE MOST URGENT CHALLENGES REQUIRING IMMEDIATE ACTION:

In many EU Member States, rural and underserved regions still lack adequate access to modern healthcare. People living in these areas struggle to receive primary, secondary, and specialised services.

As I mentioned earlier, healthcare facilities — hospitals, outpatient centres, and community services — face severe workforce shortages. In many cases this leads to reduced services and even temporary disruptions in care.

Yet citizens in these regions have the same right to high-quality healthcare as anyone else.

We must therefore act with determination to ensure equal access and to develop sustainable, long-term solutions to close this gap. We must take measures to properly plan and incentivise workforce allocation and make these regions more attractive for medical and nursing professionals — otherwise, we risk failing to meet the needs of these communities.

VI. OUR COMMON GOAL IS TO BUILD PEOPLE-CENTRED, EFFECTIVE HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS THAT ARE RESILIENT AND PREPARED FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES.

People-centred means two things:

- A patient-centred, holistic approach to diagnosis, treatment, and care;
- And fair, supportive working conditions and workforce planning for the professionals who keep our systems running.

Today's gathering is an important opportunity to learn from one another. As we look toward the future of our health systems, **we must recognise and value the skills and leadership of nurses**. Empowering nurses through **skill recognition, upskilling, and expanded responsibilities** is essential to building resilient, modern healthcare. Across Europe, we already see encouraging progress: **advanced practice nurses taking on primary and chronic disease care, specialist nurses managing conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, and nurses are leading research and driving innovation**. These models show, if nurses are empowered and prepared, they are willing to take on new responsibilities, strengthen care delivery, and support overburdened systems.

I encourage you to share your knowledge openly, so we can better understand what works — and what must change. Together, across professions, sectors, and borders, we can ensure nurses help lead the health workforce agenda and drive lasting improvements for patients and professionals.

I look forward to our discussions and to shaping solutions together.