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Titla: Specialist Nursing challenges in relation to harmonization of education, certification and recognition in the European context

Introduction

Dear esteemed members of the European Parliament and especially to Maya and Istvan, I am truly honoured to be with you all today in the heart of Brussels, surrounded by so many dedicated and numerous colleagues, to discuss a topic of great significance to us all: the relevance of the Specialist Nursing challenges concerning harmonization of education, certification and recognition in the European context. This is a comprehensive and encompassing aspect that regards all health professions in the European arena, but we are here in the EU Parliament, mainly focused on specialist nurses.

(Towards the Purposeful Action)

As the title of my presentation is related to Education, Certification and Recognition of the protected titles, let me take you on my personal journey and explain why it is so crucial for this topic. In fact, as a former regulator in early 2000, we initiated with my national regulatory authority a pathway to have regulatory bodies from different EU countries under the same umbrella in the Bruxelles arena. In this context, we have always advocated harmonizing the different educational paths to becoming a nurse over the last decades in the different EU nations. As you probably know, many differences remain, which is detrimental to patient safety and the quality of the EU citizens.

Nursing education instils a deep understanding of patients' needs, grounded in data and knowledge. This encompasses a thorough grasp of holistic assistance, physiology, and medical interventions' impact. Carefully designed systems, often led by nurses, guide patients through their entire journeys, from admission to post-hospital care, with a focus on preventing readmissions – and this is a crucial shift because primary health care and home care have to garner more prominence in the healthcare landscape.

Anyhow, in healthcare, time is a precious and scarce resource. We, as nurse specialists, cannot afford to allow ourselves to be driven by heterogeneous educational pathways at basic and advanced levels and, consequently, insufficient care practices, decisions with no impact, or misjudgements leading to unsafe patient care. Such inefficiencies not only compromise patient assistance but also deny the self-esteem of our dedicated nursing workforce.

Often, nurses find themselves stuck in routines that they know are suboptimal, yet persist due to tradition or the "we have always done it this way" mindset. This is partly due to the different educational paths they must endure to be recognized as nurses.

The harmonization of recognition of the nurse's protected titles

Regulation is the term used for the legislative process in which the health professions are governed to determine the standards for which the professions are registered in a manner that protects the public. The framework for regulation is defined and mandatory.

In this framework, ESNO proposes a table, a Regulation Network to provide an opportunity for different institutions involved in specialism in nursing and other interested parties to debate and discuss critical issues in regulation and provide an update at regular intervals about the world of regulation of advanced practice. But let me approach this issue from the perspective of those I work with daily - nursing students from Italy, especially from Rome and Sicily, who represent my most significant source of pride. These new arrivals to the healthcare scene aspire to enjoy their work and make a lifelong commitment to their noble profession. Yet, as mentors of these students, we cannot ignore the concerns that weigh on their minds. Recent years have highlighted the harsh realities of the profession - the stress, the aggression received, the relentless time pressure, and the ever-increasing responsibilities of nurses accompanied by low salaries. The worst-case scenario is when these passionate individuals end up in the loop of recognition of titles only to see their efforts being useless due to old-fashioned habits and customs prompted by different stakeholders. In this meagre scenario, the possibility of guaranteeing free **regulated** movements of nurses around Europe should be a central tenet to be discussed regularly to fit with the ever-changing societal challenges due to different social forces. In this framework, possible issues to be debated are:

- Continuing competence/revalidation and different approaches being used for specialism in nursing.
- Development of regulatory jurisdiction accreditation models for specialist nurses
- Education, accreditation and transition to practice for specialist nurses.
- Exploration of how to apply proportionate regulation.
- Ethics, ethical practice and regulation.
- Fitness for practice: conduct and competence issues.

- Governance: nature of the regulator, character of the board, membership and accountability of the board.
- Interdisciplinary issues.
- Licensing, credentialing, recognition of titles, relationships between countries.
- Mechanisms for recognition of nurse specialization.
- Promotion of standard of education and contents of curricula across different jurisdictions.
- Purpose and processes of regulation.
- Regulation of advanced practice roles.
- Regulatory collaborations.
- Research pertinent to the regulation of specialist nurses.
- Technology and information: interoperability of data production and storage.
- Unethical/illegal/endangering practices.

From Students to Professionals: Certification the key to retention

Upon graduating, nurses are licensed and officially registered to apply their knowledge. However, this transition is also a fragile moment. Will they continue to follow guidelines and systems thinking to provide quality care? Nursing professionals' research, feedback, and experiences point to the importance of continuous education, continuous certification and recertification, skill development, taking on responsibilities, and feeling a sense of belonging within the healthcare environment.

In this context, I can refer to a study in neuroscience where Gidon Felsen and Peter B. Reiner from the USA stated on the brain and autonomy:

The brain is developed with the ability to make decisions for ourselves about ourselves is among the most prized of human liberties. In this review, we reconsider the fundamental conditions necessary for autonomous decision-making, long debated by moral philosophers and ethicists, in light of current neuroscientific evidence. The most widely accepted criteria for autonomy are that a rationally deliberative and reflective agent makes decisions and that these decisions are free of undue external influences.

These tenets can be developed only if advanced practice can be accomplished by registered nurses at the highest level of advanced regulated practice.

Unfortunately, it is happening in just a few EU countries to date. We believe that only if this recognition is accomplished in all EU nations this principle will also contribute to the retention of professionals in their roles. We, as ESNO, are committed to providing a system that supports nurses in their quest for ongoing specialized education, ensuring that their achievements are certified and recognized in the European context. Currently, this is a challenge and a crisis, closely linked to the pressing issue of retaining healthcare professionals across all care domains.

The Path Forward

In the years to come, ESNO, in collaboration with EUVECA, the BeWell programs, and esteemed European institutions like CEDEFOP, have worked tirelessly to establish a credible system. And I would like to use the occasion to invite you all, as specialist nurses but also representatives from higher education institutes and different organizations, to connect with us. This endeavour necessitates alignment with governments regulatory authorities, and, most crucially, it has to have the necessary funding. We are actively exploring the possibility of obtaining EU grants to facilitate this process, as we understand that establishing a system is one thing, but making it impactful is quite another.

Join Us in Milan

To close my intervention, if you have appreciated this debate, I invite you to join us at the congress we are organizing in Milan from June 5th to 7th 2024. This event will address all the issues I have mentioned and more. We will kick things off with a special event titled "Hacking the Health Workforce Problem: Are You Ready for the Challenge?" While the subject matter is serious, we aim to infuse fresh perspectives into the discussions, such as gamification and awareness of the context. We invite you to engage in dialogue with nurses, regulators, nurse directors, other stakeholders and governmental authorities. We will also delve into topics like mobility and recruiting nurses from abroad – stating the conundrum “is it a curse or a blessing?”.

In conclusion, I hope this event will begin a new tradition of meaningful discussions and collaborations among us. Together, we can ensure that nurses can express their knowledge and skills through official recognition in all EU countries without downgrades due to pandemics or other particular strange governmental decisions. Acting professionally, in autonomy: via standard undergraduate education at primary and advanced education, certification, and

regulation are not just words but the cornerstones of a thriving and compassionate healthcare system.

Thank you.

Alessandro