

HFE's view on the future of healthcare for healthcare workers

Introduction:

Healthcare workers, i.e. every person working in a health environment, form the nerve of healthcare systems. Their work is indispensable to good care and treatment provision to patients. It is therefore essential to allocate resources accordingly in order for them to ensure the provision of quality health care. Healthcare workers for the past decades have been put under increasing pressure by healthcare systems. The demands of the job continually increase while patients' legitimate but growing expectations are also rising. It is therefore essential to rethink the systems in order to adequately support healthcare workers while protecting patient safety and safeguarding healthcare workers quality services. Sustainable investment in healthcare workers is vital to tackle the challenges brought about by an ageing society in Europe. Appropriate health workers/patient ratios in healthcare environments need to be developed to ensure equitable access to healthcare systems in Europe, and consistent safe and reliable quality healthcare provision. HFE would like to address these concerns in three key areas:

Education and continuous professional development of healthcare workers

Healthcare systems rely upon qualified healthcare workers who constitute the healthcare systems' spinal column. They humanise the system not only by providing care and treatment but by establishing trust relationships between patients and carers. The human face is necessary to safeguard patients' confidence and develop a peaceful environment where both patients and professionals will benefit from such a situation. However, for a couple of decades, health systems have tended to become more dehumanised. Healthcare workers put under increased pressure as patients' expectations are growing and the management becomes more complex as there are more players. Patients are not only demanding more in terms of new treatment and medical innovations but also ask for individualised care, patient-centered care. This cannot be provided with the current resources. National governments and regulators need to rethink the way healthcare systems are financed in order to continue developing a positive trend in healthcare systems care provision.

Healthcare workers' qualifications recognition within the EU has been welcomed by HFE but concerns remain about training standards. Indeed, although healthcare workers' mobility has been facilitated and is viewed as a positive step, HFE encourages a minimum European professional level for healthcare workers that could be three years, i.e. a bachelor degree. Quality standard education in every Member State is essential to equitable patient safety in Europe.

This is where we call upon the European Union to play an active role. The Commission must aspire to set the standard for education and make sure that all initiatives fit within the Bologna process. It must encourage and support education as part of its broader social policy objectives. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on providing appropriate training and recertification of healthcare workers. Implementing modules in patient safety as a core part of health education, nursing education and continuous professional development can be a way of doing so.

Finally, healthcare workers' continuous professional development must be promoted at the European level in order to encourage Member States establishing safe and continuously improving health systems. It is essential that healthcare workers receive training throughout life not only to maintain a high level of knowledge and expertise but to keep professionals on top of care, new treatments, procedures and technology. Innovation will only benefit patients if healthcare workers make good and effective use of it. It is also necessary to facilitate an open learning culture where Member States will benefit from best practices examples in other countries. Such system will encourage healthcare facilities to learn from each other but can only be achieved if mistakes and incidents are also reported and communicated widely without fear of 'name and shame'.



Health and Safety at work for healthcare workers

Patient safety is rightly considered as a vital issue that decision-makers need to take into account when ameliorating healthcare systems. However, safety is an issue for everyone who enters a healthcare facility, i.e. patients, visitors, contractors and practitioners. One of the main safety issues are healthcare associated infections (HCAs). According to the European Commission, there are approximately three million healthcare associated infections and 50, 000 attributable deaths in the European Union each year.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work recently published the European Risk Observatory Report titled 'Expert Forecasts on Emerging Biological Risks related to Occupational Safety and Health'. The report identifies workers exposure to drug resistant micro-organisms as one of the top ten emerging risks. It reports an increasing number of hospital staff infected with MRSA. The report also highlights the importance of using medical devices incorporating sharps protection mechanisms to prevent needlestick injuries. Injuries with used needles are a source of major concern and psychological stress for healthcare workers, as they can lead to potentially fatal infections including Hepatitis B virus, Hepatitis C virus and HIV.

The European Commission's 2004 competition report (SEC (2004)1397) recognised the growing shortage of workers in the health sector as a matter of particular concern for the European Union. One of the reasons why a career in healthcare is not seen as attractive is the fear regarding personal health and safety risks. Healthcare workers' safety at work and patients' safety must therefore be enhanced by measures to protect them from HCAs and other potentially fatal infections. Health First Europe supports the European Commission's proposals to improve Directive 2000/54/EC to ensure better protection of healthcare workers from needlestick injuries and associated dangerous blood-borne pathogens. Health First Europe also calls on the Commission to take a leadership role in the global fight against healthcare associated infections, by identifying and disseminating proven best practices in the form of a European Code of Practice.

Practitioners need to be able to evolve in safe working environments. Innovation is key to reduce the risks for both patients and healthcare workers. However, in order to use innovation' potential at its maximum, it is necessary to promote effective equipment and procedures' education and training in order to avoid medical errors and mistakes. National governments but also health system managers have a responsibility to ensure a culture of safety in EU health systems through:

- Promoting best practices;
- Establishing guidelines for practitioners;
- Developing a 'no blame, no shame' culture where people can learn from mistakes.
- Meeting their responsibilities regarding workplace risk prevention

Migration, mobility and the brain drain

Migration, mobility and brain drain are major issues that every sector is facing in a single market where an unavoidable demographic trend has started. Nonetheless, those issues take a different dimension when applied to healthcare systems. This demographic trend will not only add to the shortage of healthcare workers but will at the same time increase healthcare demand. We are facing one of the biggest challenges that we ever had and the tools are our disposal need to be handled with great care. The mobility of workers is indeed a way of helping reduce our problem but this need to be done without weakening other, less fortunate, countries.

An ageing population require more care that can only be provided by more healthcare workers but where and how do we find those workers and how do we ensure that they are qualified for our European systems and that we are not adding to the already substantial healthcare problems of developing countries?

Even though our healthcare systems' sustainability rely upon sufficient health professionals, we cannot attract healthcare workers without looking at the consequences of such brain drain in our neighbour countries and beyond. HFE encourages mobility but advocates that this process be handled with care by national authorities. Migration has become such a great problem in Eastern European countries that it risks putting a real threat on public health. Certain hospitals even have to close doors on certain days because they do not have enough healthcare workers.

The OECD study on Health Workforce and Migration acknowledges that there is a shortage of healthcare staff in Europe and in the world for nurses and doctors. European healthcare systems will therefore not be able to compensate by importing staff from other countries and other continents. Other solutions need to be found. It is urgent to train healthcare workers and encourage young people to study nursing/medicines in order to cover our future healthcare needs and maintain the EU competitiveness. Demographic developments will also have the effect of increasing work pressure and putting even more strain on working conditions in the healthcare sector so that even less people will be urged to choose a job in this sector. As a consequence, it is essential to urgently resolve problems with health and safety at work and other issues of working conditions to prevent high qualified trained staff from leaving the profession after a few years or less, and by encouraging and educating more people to enter the healthcare professions.

Conclusion:

Healthcare workers face a daily palpable pressure as healthcare systems resources and professionals decrease while the demand is seemingly growing endlessly. The future health challenges such as the ageing population and shortage of healthcare workers need to be addressed quickly. HFE encourages decision-makers at European and national levels to:

- Invest in healthcare systems as a long-term responsibility
- Promote European education standards
- Develop continuous professional development
- Ensure healthcare workers safety in the workplace, using appropriate legislation
- Encouraging the provision of education and access to increase the use of innovative technologies and practices that can improve the efficiency and sustainability of health systems
- Develop a European policy in migration, mobility and brain drain.