



News from Brussels

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High-level Conference on the Future EU Health Union in the context of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The end of the Belgian Presidency coincides with the conclusion of the mandates of the current EU Commission and Parliament. It is however still uncertain how high Health will be placed among the priorities of the EU agenda in the coming years.



Under the slogan '*A Europe that cares, prepares and protects*', the aim of the two-day conference, held in Brussels on the 26th and 27th of March, was to reflect on the future EU Health agenda. More than 300 participants, including the European Commissioner for Health, ministers, state secretaries, delegations from Member States and EU institutions, stakeholders, and academics attended the event, underscoring significant interest in the topics discussed.

Issues debated ranged from health workforce challenges and disease prevention, to medicine supplies, and crisis preparedness. One thing became evident: the current and forthcoming challenges in health policy are crucial and resonate with many EU Member States and stakeholders.

Health workforce shortages and mismatches in skills currently prevail in all EU countries. During the conference, calls for a Health Workforce Strategy at the European level were made. Such a strategy would need to be linked to health systems transformation. It should encompass planning, recruitment, training, working conditions, professional development, and an evaluation of the impact of existing EU legal frameworks on national health workforce strategies.

Participants also exchanged on vulnerabilities in the supply chain of critical medicines, exacerbated by shortages and external dependencies. Ultimately, recommendations emphasized continued efforts through initiatives like Critical Medicine Alliances and the creation of a legal framework to address supply chain vulnerabilities, referred to as Critical Medicines Act. Additionally, different possible approaches to stockpiling medicines in the EU were discussed, as well as related challenges.

Discussions on strengthening non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention within the context

of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan focused on the health issues associated with alcohol consumption. The importance of accurate alcohol labeling (including ingredients and nutrient content) was underscored. As these are legislative actions announced under Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, a clear call for continued and accelerated action on the prevention pillar of the Plan was voiced.

Crisis preparedness was addressed through a thought-provoking hypothetical scenario of a large flooding. Decision-making processes at the EU level in the area of health crisis management were debated. It was agreed that the European Health Union already introduced numerous valuable new initiatives, but many unanswered questions remain. **There was consensus among the participants that a coherent, transparent, and effective European framework for health emergency preparedness and response is essential.**

Finally, the importance of investing in health was an overarching theme in discussions. The EU offers various funding opportunities that can be used for health investments notably to strengthen and transform healthcare systems. While the establishment of an EU Health Resources Hub has the potential to support Member States in undertaking health investments and reforms with impact on the ground, we could also further explore how to optimise the strategic use of existing EU funds for health.

As the conference came to an end, officials and experts recalled the accomplishments of the EU in the field of Health as well as the challenges ahead. The High-level Conference on the Future EU Health Union offered avenues for reflection on how to overcome them. Different perspectives on how to strengthen the EU Health Union were expressed. However, the overall message was clear: The Health and Well-Being of citizens must remain high on the EU agenda of the next European Commission.

For more information about this article, please click [here](#)

EU at risk of medical desert warns EU Commissioner

The EU executive has acknowledged the current shortages of medical staff and the importance of improving working conditions for healthcare and care workers through some key actions.

On the 20th of March, EU Employment and Social Affairs Commissioner, **Mr. Nicolas Schmit** warned "*We need more health workers*" and said it was imperative to make these jobs more attractive, especially in rural areas, to avoid the risk of ‘medical deserts’ arising. "*Medical deserts are a reality, and this has to be seriously taken into account,*" the Commissioner explained at a press conference in Brussels, on the 20th of March.



Mr. Nicolas Schmit, EU Commissioner of employment and social affairs

A shortage is currently affecting the health sector, especially in the context of increasing demand for their services in an aging society, the Commissioner said in the presentation of a new Action Plan to tackle labour and skills shortages.

"*Care work is undervalued in many countries, so not very well-paid*", he said, adding that improvements should be made by social partners as well through negotiations on better collective agreements in the sector.

The Commissioner made the remarks during the launch of the new Plan in the context of research carried out by the Commission, which found half of the workers in the healthcare sector reporting high levels of stress attributable to inadequate health and safety conditions, including risk of violence at work.

The Action Plan called on Member States to develop policies to attract and retain nurses through improved working conditions and mentoring initiatives, especially in rural areas.

“Retention is a key objective, and this is achieved by ensuring safe staffing levels, lawful working conditions and investing in doctors’ wellbeing,” commented Standing Committee of European Physicians (CPME) **Secretary General Sarada Das**. The Secretary General insisted the Commission should take action to protect professionals from burnout and the increasing acts of violence.

For more information about this article, click [here](#)

METEOR Project Shows EU hospital workers Ready to Quit as Retention Issues Continue

Almost one in 10 health workers across the European Union (EU) intend to leave their profession, according to a new cross-sectional study from the EU-funded METEOR Project, highlighting widespread retention issues.



Researchers from the METEOR Project – which collects scientific knowledge on job retention of healthcare workers in Europe to develop policy recommendations to increase job retention – asked **381 physicians and 1,351 nurses at hospitals in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Poland**, about their intention to exit the profession or leave their current hospital, and the factors influencing their decisions to quit.

The results showed 9% of physicians and nearly 14% of nurses declaring an intention to leave their profession, citing low job satisfaction, growing depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion as the primary factors.

The survey also revealed that 16.3% of physicians and 8.4% of nurses are considering leaving their current jobs. Factors impacting nurse and physician retention in hospitals highlighted job dissatisfaction, lack of career development and poor work-life balance as the main determinants of intention to leave, which the researchers suggested can ‘help governments and hospital administrators combat the trend’.

Laura Maniscalco, co-author of the study and Research Fellow at the University of Palermo said: ‘Many physicians want to leave their current workplaces because of the management and personal issues. In the high-stress environment of a hospital, they can face challenges in terms of work-life balance or conflicts that can result in bullying.

‘Additionally, the ineffectiveness of the management system and understaffing can force them to work in areas outside of their expertise, leading to role conflicts and reducing opportunities for career advancement.’”

Domenica Matranga, a professor at the University of Palermo and co-author of the study, added: ‘Our research suggests that nurses may [also] no longer find their job rewarding or valued. This issue is connected with relatively low salaries, tough working conditions and, of course, the physical and emotional pressure caused by the pandemic. ‘

Uncertainty Looms for Main EU Health Program

On March 11th, EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides confirmed before the Committee on Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety the decision taken by the European Council to slash approximately €1 Billion from EU4Health programs. Amid budgetary constraints at the EU level, MEPs learned that almost 20% of the initial budget was to be relocated to the recent €10.6 billion finance aid plan for Ukraine.

EU4Health is currently the most important initiative at the EU level for the entire healthcare sector. Launched in the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, the programme is a direct response to the weaknesses observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently provided with a €5.3 billion budget, it focuses on access to medical products and devices, disease, and crisis prevention, and strengthening healthcare systems. With a myriad of actors involved, including civil society actors, this program aims at supporting national healthcare systems via EU funding to work programs.

Health Commissioner, Ms. Stella Kyriakides

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The reduction of funding to EU4Health will likely spark further concerns about its future, especially as the exact nature of the cuts has not been decided on. Commissioner Kyriakides nonetheless acknowledged that these cuts would have "impacts on our future actions" and that the Commission will attempt to balance the cuts between immediate issues and long-term programs. The Commissioner also announced

that these cuts would not impact the 2024 budget but would spread out over the 2025-2027 period.

Attempting to reassure the MEPs in the audience, the Commissioner assured that what was left 'is still a very significant budget'. Nonetheless, several MEPs expressed their dissatisfaction with the EU Council decision. MEP Cristian-Silviu BUSOI (EPP, Romania), rapporteur of the EU4Health program, described the move as "not a good sign", while shadow rapporteur Sara Cerdas (S&D, Portugal), said that "the budget cut concerning, and quite a deep cut" and reminded that the program already suffered previous significant cuts which sent the wrong message to citizens and healthcare professionals.

The extent to which this decision will impact health professionals in their activity remains unknown, but setbacks are expected. As the Commission details the cuts, we will inform you of the impact it could have on EU health professionals.

Care4care European Meeting: Fighting Gender and immigration-based discrimination in the care sector

On the 17th of April, stakeholders from across the European Union gathered for an important conference aimed at addressing migration and gender-based discrimination within the care sector. Organized as part of the **Care4care project**, the event brought together researchers, policymakers, and care workers to delve into the complex challenges faced by caregivers across Europe.



Mr. Thomas Hector, Policy Advisor at EFFE & Co-organizer of the event

The conference commenced with an introductory speech delivered by the Care4care project coordinator, **Professor Maria Luisa Vallauri**. In her address, Professor Vallauri underscored the significance of the issues under discussion, emphasizing the urgent need for action to address systemic injustices within the care sector. She articulated a vision of a future where care workers receive adequate support and recognition for their vital contributions. Her words set the tone for the day's debates, calling on attendees to engage collaboratively in the pursuit of meaningful solutions.

Throughout the morning session, researchers presented findings from their respective countries, shedding light on the realities of caregiving across Europe. From Italy to Poland, France to

Germany, speakers outlined the challenges of personnel shortages, low wages, and insufficient legal protections. Attendees engaged in thoughtful discussions, focusing on the complexities of Dialogue and the need for gender and migrant rights within the care sector.

In the afternoon, participants from diverse backgrounds exchanged perspectives and ideas, seeking common ground on issues of gender equality and migrant rights, and accessibility to the Social Dialogue. Facilitators shared the key findings from these discussions, highlighting areas for further action and collaboration.

As the conference drew to an end, experts shared reflections and recommendations with the assembly. Speakers emphasized the importance of concrete measures to address discrimination and improve conditions for care workers.

Overall, the Care4care conference, in which ENC was represented by Jr. Policy Adviser Mr. Charles Bary, provided a platform for meaningful dialogue and collaboration on issues of migration and gender-based discrimination in the care sector. As stakeholders continue to work together towards solutions, the vision of a more equitable and inclusive care sector moves closer to reality.