

PROFILING THE EUROPEAN HEALTH WORKFORCE OF TOMORROW



#EUworkforce4care

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1. Foreword



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The health care sector is rapidly transforming. National and EU policies on health should keep pace starting from the backbone of the health care system, its workforce.

Health care systems across Europe are facing major challenges, both internal and external, from ageing societies to the advent of new technologies, increasing social inequities and challenging financial sustainability. Health demands and needs are evolving, as are the societies and innovations aimed at improving the performance of health care systems. The capacity of health systems to address the changing needs for care strongly depends on their workforce, its availability, skills, mobility and flexibility. **In order to build a resilient workforce and meet the challenges of Health 2.0, a paradigm shift in health care systems is required. This shift should start from the workforce core competences,** moving towards a more holistic approach and goal-oriented care, aimed at tackling chronic problems and multimorbidity while putting patients' needs and goals at the centre of care. This development ultimately implies a strong focus on health promotion, empowerment and prevention, which concerns primary, secondary as well as tertiary care.

The health care professionals of the future carry their core competences across settings and tasks. Their core generalist skills, essential knowledge and approach to care should transcend the boundaries of specific disciplines, making them adaptable to different environments and to task shifting.

On this note, the Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health, which I am chairing, published the "[opinion on 'Task shifting in health systems'](#)" in July 2019.

This opinion intends to support the European Commission and member states in reforming health systems, looking at task shifting as an opportunity to boost financial sustainability and improve access to and quality of care. In our shared perspective only a system which equips and adequately trains its professionals can follow the path of task shifting and meet the challenges of Health 2.0.

Bearing these issues in mind, the following Working Paper reflects the views of Health First Europe members and key health care students' associations, calls upon health care systems and policymakers to revamp and support high levels of education and training and to invest in continuous professional development programmes. This is necessary to make sure that health care professionals can be better equipped to respond to the fast-changing health sector, to accelerate its reform and to ensure the sustainability of health care systems. The main purpose of this paper is to point out the critical role of the health workforce in the debate about health system transformation and to showcase solutions and approaches for implementing systematic changes.

Over time, many health stakeholders and experts have emphasised the need of developing new approaches on care and investing more in education. Hence, it is time for policymakers and relevant stakeholders to put the right conditions in place for keeping pace with the transformation of the health care sector and stimulate investments for health care reforms and for developing common skill sets. The following paper intends to give some food for thought in this direction, your critical reading and reflections will be appreciated.

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3. Executive summary

European health systems require significant transformation to ensure their future sustainability, efficiency and improved patient's outcomes. According to the OECD analysis, health spending in Europe will become excessive by 2050 if policymakers fail to reconstruct the systems via new delivery models, processes, services, financial mechanisms, and workforce planning and skills development.¹

Health First Europe (HFE) has been a pioneer in the debate about transformation of care, providing policy recommendations to deliver new model of care and encouraging the transformation of care through innovation. Health care is highly labour intensive and one of the largest economic sectors in the EU: Europe's 18.6 million health care workers represent 8.5% of the total workforce, they are involved in a wide range of activities to promote healthy lifestyles and to prevent, diagnose and treat illnesses². We believe that health workers play a pivotal role in driving a successful transformation of care.

For this reason, in February 2019 HFE decided to bring together a broad range of health stakeholders, from health care managers to medical students, to launch an inclusive debate **to shape the profile of the health worker of the future. The discussion aimed at outlining the core competences required in the emerging models of care, gaps in the current workforce educational and profession pathways, and highlight the policy changes necessary to support health workers in the transformation of care.**

[1] OECD Health Working Paper No. 110 - Health Spending Projections to 2030

[2] State of Health in the EU: Companion Report 2017 - https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/state/docs/2017_companion_en.pdf

The result of this exercise is a Working Document which serves as a starting point for future discussions and actions covering:

1. The current challenges faced by EU member states' health systems due to the demand for new primary care models and better integrated care. Europe is experiencing a rising demand for complex care linked with a percentage growth in the European elderly population with chronic and multiple diseases. New patient's needs require different skill sets, as well as different ways of working across sectors and disciplines. Also, there is a lack of joint strategy for the future of care delivery to tackle common and cross-border issues.

2. The core competences required for the health care workforce of the future. A European profile covering Interdisciplinary teamwork skills, person-centric communication skills, digital skills and adaptability to different settings and models of care can contribute to a more effective workforce, encouraging a service delivery that is evidence-based, patient-centred and socially accountable.

3. The policy recommendations addressed to the European policymakers aiming to develop a European effective and sustainable health care workforce planning, to value the virtual triangle citizens - carers - innovation to transform health care for the well-being of all and to enhance the EU role in creating a common vision for the future of care delivery.

Reforming and investing in the health workers' education and core competences is critical to deliver a high quality of care and sustainability of European health care systems. Only by working together, European policymakers and EU countries can develop a common profile for the health care worker of the future, equipped with the necessary skills to transform health care for better patient and workforce outcomes.

4. Unlocking the future of the EU health care workforce

Health systems are under a tremendous pressure based on a confluence of factors, such as the increased prevalence of chronic diseases, changing population demographics, restrained health care budgets and institutionalised systems out of date with modern day requirements. These challenges affect the health and well-being of every EU citizen and require imaginative thinking along with decisive changes.

The transformation of health care systems implies structural changes and disruptive reforms to become more resilient, accessible and effective in providing quality care to European citizens³. It may require the redefinition of the relationship between different providers of treatment, the introduction of new stakeholders and a cultural re-thinking for carers and citizens. Therefore, a joint effort is necessary to improving the well-being of each of us.

Since health care is highly labour intensive and one of the largest economic sectors in the EU, recognising health workers' role in building strong and resilient health systems is critical to respond to **the challenges that the health care systems are facing and ensure their financial sustainability.**

Europe's 18.6 million health and care workers represent 8.5% of the total workforce and they are involved in a wide range of activities to promote healthy lifestyles, prevent, diagnose and treat illnesses. In this light, reforming and investing in the health workers' education and core competences is key to delivering high-quality standards of care and facing the challenges of the European health care systems.

[3] Communication from the Commission "On effective, accessible and resilient health systems", COM(2014) 215 final

CHALLENGE	DESCRIPTION
<p>Shortage of workforce and rising demand of care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Commission estimates the gap in supply of human resources in health sector by 2020 to be approximately 1 million health professionals. Ultimately, this shortage of workforce would mean that almost 15% of demand for health care across the EU will not be covered by the available workforce ⁴ • Health care professionals move from poorer regions to richer ones, these flows often go from East to West of Europe. This brain-drain is causing shortage of health care workers, as well as health care students, in several European regions • Increasing demand of complex care due to the percentage growth in the elderly population affected by multiple diseases • Health professionals are often considered the employees most prone to occupational burnout⁵. Shortage of resources and rising demand of care can increase the risk of burnout for the staff in all health care settings. The risk of burnout and stressful working environment might ultimately lead professionals to look into career paths beyond health care facilities, further increasing their shortage of human resources
<p>Evolution of care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The shifting of the health systems' focus from acute care episodes towards a preventive and person-centred pathway to cope with a growth in chronic diseases ⁶ • The increasing expectations from patients towards comprehensive, patient-centred care requires appropriate answers from the health systems, such as the evolution towards goal-oriented care (i.e. focusing on the life-goals of the patients, meaning the maximum desirable and achievable quality and/or quantity of life as defined by each individual) ⁷ • Growing need for home and community-based care to support people living with multiple chronic diseases, multimorbidity • Digitalisation of health care and the potential impact of diagnostic information clashing with the workforce's lack of digital skills ⁸
<p>Lack of a European strategy for the future of care delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing uncertainty surrounding common definitions of health professions, recognitions and training • Lack of a European common vision to address the challenges of the health care sector and changing roles of health care professionals, including workforce planning, training, development and resource allocation • Absence of common digital infrastructures for health care workers

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/workforce/docs/health_workforce_study_2012_report_en.pdf

[5] <http://healthcare-communications.imedpub.com/occupational-burnout-of-health-care-professionals-in-hospitals.php?aid=23175>

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/health/expert_panel/sites/expertpanel/files/023_taskshifting_en.pdf

[7] Family Medicine: The Classic Papers - Michael Kidd, Iona Heath, Amanda Howe, 2016 - Endorsed by World Organization of Family Doctors

[8] <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/content/nearly-half-europeans-dont-have-basic-digital-skills>

5. Core competences of the European health care workforce of the future

The following core competences for the health care workforce cover the essential skills for developing a European profile for the health care workforce of the future. These competences include the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the practice of public health, transcending the boundaries of specific disciplines. **A European profile for the health care workforce can contribute to a more effective workforce, encouraging a service delivery that is evidence-based, patient-centred and socially accountable.**

5.1 Interdisciplinary teamwork skills

Care should be organised and coordinated over time among care givers, patients and across different settings. An interdisciplinary approach involves health care professionals from different disciplines working collaboratively to take decisions and share resources and responsibilities for a common goal. An interdisciplinary approach should be the baseline for partnering with other professionals and challenging traditional boundaries.⁹

This approach to care can result in creating a more collaborative and healthier environment for workers, better patient outcomes, improved financial performance and - on a bigger scale - as part of the redesign of the health care system. An interdisciplinary approach has proved to be effective in managing chronic diseases, conditions which affect one-third of the European population aged 15 and over in Europe,¹⁰ and 23.5% of working-age Europeans.¹¹

Chronic conditions imply that the patient needs to see different professionals to manage their disease and avoid complications. In order to be more patient-centric and provide the best treatment plan, health care workforce should work in partnership, breaking down communication barriers among different specialisations.

[9] A good example of EU efforts to foster collaboration behind traditionally boundaries is the European Reference Networks (ERNs), virtual networks involving healthcare providers across Europe to facilitate discussion on complex or rare diseases

[10] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-europe-2016_9789264265592-en

[11] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5923823/>

Therefore, health care systems should invest in providing the right skills to:

- Break down communication barriers between specialists
- Adopt a collaborative, coordinated approach to technology development, decision-making and patient management to ultimately find innovative ways to deliver care
- Build a team culture of trust, valuing diversity and make the most of other team members' background and skills
- Pay attention to social determinants of health and assure that they are addressed through intersectoral actions

5.2 Person-centric communication skills

Person-centred care has emerged as a key approach to health care. The skill set for delivering person-centred care implies a shift in the relationship between care giver and patient, better informing patients about the treatment received as well as offering various options based on a person's unique concerns, needs and preferences.¹² On top of that, health care workers should receive the right information and knowledge about public health and how health care systems operate in order to enable them to be the best advocates for their patients.

Person-centric communication skills include understanding patient's perspective of the illness and exploring patients' feelings, ideas, concerns and experience. Communication and interpersonal skills looking also at the interconnection between biology, psychology, and socio-environmental factors, are essential elements of this skill set.

Good communication skills can bring valuable insights to help foster a better working partnership. In the health care sector, given the close interaction between professionals and patients, these skills are vital to perform in difficult and emotional circumstances. Secondly, good communication skills help patients feel at ease, making them more likely to disclose the true extent of their feelings and symptoms. This greater focus on communication frequently leads to better patient outcomes as well.

[12] <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/4/e007864>

Therefore, health care systems should invest in providing the right skills to:

- Communicate effectively with the patients to involve them in the decision-making process
- Encourage preventive measures in health care to maximise the value of screening and early diagnosis
- Value diagnostic information to optimise care pathways
- Support patient self-management and independence

5.3 Digital skills

Digital technologies are an inevitable part of the future of the European health care systems. Digital health aims at creating smarter health care processes, improving the collaboration between health care professionals and allowing them to deliver care closer to patients. It is crucial that health care professionals possess the necessary skills and knowledge to make the digital transformation of care happen. Their digital skill set should be oriented to understanding and using digital technologies, devices and data sharing tools (starting from electronic health records) to make the best use of innovative tools and promote their acceptance by other users (might be the patients or other health care professionals).

By improving their digital skills, health care professionals can prevent repetitive tasks, identify better ways to collect and share health data to improve patients' outcomes, leaving more to the care of the patients rather than to data input, and ensuring that the uptake of those solutions meets people's needs.

Therefore, health care systems should invest in providing the right skills to:

- Understand and use electronic health records
- Work in an interdisciplinary environment which includes communication with technology developers (e.g. biomedical engineers) and other support staff
- Show critical thinking on data collection and protection
- Work with the support of supercomputing and artificial intelligence, keeping in mind the importance of the human element while delivering care as well as being able to critically assess the information provided by those technologies

5.4 Adaptability to different settings and models of care

Workforce adaptability means the ability of health care professionals to adapt to different health care settings and models of care, having the opportunity to grow and develop personal knowledge, skills and relationships. This goes along with the system adaptability to a growing ageing workforce to enable older workers to continue working by adapting their tasks and making a smooth transition to a new phase in their working life.

By enhancing workforce adaptability to different settings and models, health care systems can develop new, smarter roles to make care delivery more efficient, while continuing to invest in personal development and health professional wellbeing (which leads to a safer and more effective delivery of care). Ultimately, this skill set can boost the system capability to match the demand of care and find new solutions to tackle workforce shortage.

Therefore, health care systems should invest in providing the right skills to:

- Deliver care in different settings, from hospital to community
- Identify opportunities for health professionals to develop and share their expertise across identified and agreed boundaries
- Adapt to different circumstances, quickly switching responsibilities in an emergency setting
- Understand and promote the connection between primary, secondary & tertiary care

6. Our recommendations to shape the health workforce of the future

What should EU policymakers do to shape the workforce of the future?



CHALLENGE

Shortage of workforce and rising demand of care



POLICY GOAL

Developing a European strategy for effective and sustainable health care workforce planning



CALL TO ACTION

- Updating the 2012 European Commission's Action Plan for EU Health Workforce to promote new models of care and promote a European profile for the health workforce of the future
- Expanding the scope of the European professional cards (EPCs) to more professions
- Launching a baseline study focused on the health workforce in Europe assessing capacity, shortage and the brain-drain phenomenon, lack in skills and resources and looking at the impact of aging population and migration
- Developing a common solution to the health care workforce shortage and investigating the opportunity of a solidarity scheme to balance the brain-drain of health care workforce across Europe
- Ensuring worker and patient involvement in shaping workforce planning and competences

6. Our recommendations to shape the health workforce of the future

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CHALLENGE

Evolution of care



POLICY GOAL

Implementing the virtual triangle citizens - carers - innovation to transform health care for the well-being of each citizen and the society



CALL TO ACTION

- Promoting the value of innovation from the perspective of the health workforce, identifying the value elements for each health care professional
- Recognising the value and role of emerging professions - with respect to higher demands of complex care - from biomedical engineering to specialised nurses, new digital health professionals' and health care assistants
- Including digital skills along with patient-centred care and multidisciplinary skills as core competences in undergraduate training programmes including cross-disciplinary experiences as part of the European profile of the workers of the future
- Reconsidering financial models and budget allocations to reflect the new relationship between health and social care workers

6. Our recommendations to shape the health workforce of the future

What should EU policymakers do to shape the workforce of the future?



CHALLENGE

Lack of a European strategy for the future of care delivery



POLICY GOAL

Encouraging EU member states' collaboration to develop a common vision for the future of care delivery



CALL TO ACTION

- Enhancing collaboration between the European Commission and member states on the integration and harmonisation of core competences in health care in the national curricula and across Europe
- Developing digital infrastructures for health care education and continuous training
- Supporting member states in developing national and regional health care workforce planning, providing a common framework and guidance, taking into account the issue of ageing workforce and the fundamental right of free movement of people
- Facilitating best practices' exchange at national and local level to improve workforce planning and skill development

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