

METEOR POLICY BRIEF

Mental Health: Focus on Retention of Healthcare Workers

Draft Report Policy Recommendations

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
METEOR project	3
Survey results.....	3
Methodology co-creation workshops.....	3
Policy Recommendations	4
Belgium	4
The Netherlands.....	8
Italy	12
Poland	15
Conclusion.....	18
Next steps	18
Key References.....	19
Contact Details	19

Introduction

Healthcare organizations face challenges in retaining physicians and nurses, resulting in increased costs, decreased care quality, and lower patient satisfaction (1). Demographic changes, heightened healthcare demands, and financial constraints have contributed to recruitment and retention difficulties (1). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated these challenges, with higher intentions to quit among healthcare workers and potential long-term mental health implications (2). To improve staff retention, this policy brief provides key findings and policy recommendations, derived from physicians, nurses, health assistants, hospital management and policy makers, aimed at enhancing hospital's ability to retain their workforce.

METEOR project

The METEOR project (2021–2024) focuses on job retention of healthcare workers in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Poland, aiming to enhance scientific understanding of job retention and develop policy recommendations using a bottom-up approach. In the first phase of the project, two systematic reviews were published on determinants and interventions that address job retention (3,4). In the second phase, an online survey was submitted and analysed to identify factors associated with physicians' and nurses' intention to leave (publication in progress). In the third phase, co-creation workshops with key stakeholders have generated policy recommendations, which resulted in this policy brief. Ultimately, the project will provide stakeholders with an interactive online toolbox containing all comprehensive information. For further details and updates, visit the website: www.meteorproject.eu.

Survey results

The METEOR survey was conducted to estimate turnover intention, and to identify factors influencing job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover among healthcare workers in four European countries. Firstly, the survey revealed that 17% of physicians and 9% of the nurses expressed the intention to leave their current hospital, while 9% of physicians and 14% of nurses intended to leave the healthcare profession altogether. Only 13% of physicians and 16% of nurses had a high job satisfaction, while 23% of physicians and 24% of nurses felt emotionally exhausted. In addition, the survey identified individual and work environment factors that affected the intention to leave, job satisfaction, and burnout. It found that female healthcare workers exhibited lower engagement and a higher inclination to leave compared to their male counterparts, and there was variability associated with specialty wards, particularly those employed in surgery are more intended to leave. Depersonalization and job dissatisfaction were identified as direct determinants of turnover intention, with work engagement being particularly relevant for nurses. Consequently, designing policy recommendations must consider specific dimensions and the unique requirements of different healthcare sectors, tailored to the specific needs of each country.

Methodology co-creation workshops

This multi-country study involved hospitals and policymakers in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Poland. Data collection methods included 8 online workshops, 4 Delphi-inspired sessions, and 7 interviews with physicians (n= 15), nurses (n= 31), health assistants (n= 6), hospital management (n= 16) and policymakers (n= 7). The policy recommendations presented in this brief are based on a bottom-up approach, derived from the data collected from these stakeholders. Recruitment used personalized emails and internal newsletters with online registration. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained from the Ethics Committee Research UZ / KU Leuven (S66009) in January 2022, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Thematic analysis using NVivo software and an exploratory analysis were performed based on established frameworks and WHO guidelines (5–7).

To structure the data, we first organized it according to the countries included in the study, namely Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Poland. Subsequently, we followed the thematic framework proposed by Barribal et al. (2015), which consists of four main themes:

1. Professional and Personal Support: This theme aims to create a supportive and collaborative work environment that promotes professional growth and well-being.
2. Education: This involves providing different types of training and development programs to enhance knowledge, skills and competencies, while also supporting career opportunities.
3. Regulation: This pertains to the provision of all types of legislative frameworks to address issues, like an excessive workload, fair distribution of tasks, and streamlining administrative processes.
4. Financial and Infrastructural: This category focuses on addressing financial and infrastructural aspects to support healthcare workers, such as organising transport, creating feasible recreational spaces, or introducing greenery in the hospital environment.

Additionally, the data were further divided into two main sections: governmental level policy recommendations and recommendations specifically tailored for hospitals or healthcare institutes. This division ensures that policy measures can be targeted at both the governmental level and the organizational level, ensuring a comprehensive approach to address the identified challenges and opportunities in healthcare workforce support and development.

Policy Recommendations

Belgium

Professional and personal support

Governmental level

- Foster interprofessional collaborations: Develop and implement policies that support and incentivize interprofessional teamwork and collaboration across healthcare institutions, to reduce conflicts and promote knowledge sharing. This can be achieved through initiatives such as creating interdepartmental task forces, organizing regular interdisciplinary meetings, and establishing collaborative platforms for information exchange.
- Encourage and facilitate internal mobility within and across healthcare organizations: This is to promote collaboration and continuity of care. Explore policy measures that remove barriers and encourage healthcare professionals to work in different healthcare settings, such as hospitals, residential care facilities, and home care. Provide support and resources to enable seamless transitions and ensure the quality of care.
- Support flexibility in the timetable: Allow flexibility in the working hours of healthcare professionals through a clear legislative framework. In addition, facilities outside the hospital (e.g. day-care) should be available to support flexible working hours. More flexibility will promote work-life balance and support overall well-being of healthcare professionals.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: This can be achieved by promoting initiatives that encourage organizations to show appreciation and recognition (e.g. awareness campaigns such as recognition days) towards employees. National efforts should prioritize acknowledging the contributions of healthcare professionals and foster a culture of appreciation within the healthcare sector.

Hospital / Institutional level

- Prioritize team and conflict management: Provide opportunities for interprofessional collaboration and knowledge sharing to enhance teamwork and reduce conflicts. Ensure that agreements made during team meetings are implemented in practice and regularly evaluate team roles and dynamics.
- Foster interprofessional collaborations: Establish regular communication channels and team meetings that include various types of healthcare workers to promote interprofessional collaboration. Hospitals can

achieve this through systematic interprofessional team meetings or by creating opportunities from staff from different departments to work together on joint projects.

- Encourage and facilitate internal mobility within and across healthcare organisations: Facilitate internal mobility within and across healthcare organizations, making it easier for healthcare professionals to move between different settings. This includes encouraging collaboration and shared care between professionals in hospitals, residential care facilities, home care, and other healthcare organizations.
- Support flexibility in the timetable: Prioritize the development of feasible and flexible schedules that consider employees' individual needs. Consider independent or team-level timetabling, provide clear and well-planned schedules in advance, and establish contingency plans for unexpected events.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: Show appreciation and recognition towards employees by providing small gifts or tokens of appreciation on special occasions such as holidays, work anniversaries, or celebrating successes. Prioritize acknowledging the contributions of healthcare professionals.
- Ensure active management involvement: Ensure that directors, management, and care managers regularly visit the work floor to observe operations and identify problems. Ensure that staff members know their managers and understand their roles in providing support.
- Facilitate task-sharing: Implement a structured initiative to promote task-sharing among non-clinical and clinical staff, as well as between different types of clinical staff. For example, non-clinical personnel (e.g. administrative staff, cleaning staff etc.) could have the opportunity to designate a certain amount of time per week to engage in patient-related tasks (e.g. food distribution to patients). The entire team should collaborate cohesively by a patient-centric approach, to enhance not only the quality of care delivery but also contribute to the mental health of both patients and staff. Moreover, such an approach fosters a strong sense of team spirit, improving communication, collaboration, mutual comprehension across professional roles, and providing support during high workload periods.

Education

Governmental level

- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: Prioritize comprehensive onboarding programs that ensure a positive first impression, effective instruction, training, and guidance during the initial career phase. Allocate resources and attention to create a supportive environment from the start.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Recognize the importance of lifelong learning and stimulate continuous professional development and growth opportunities for healthcare staff. By providing a variety of learning avenues, we can create a culture that values ongoing learning and enables healthcare professionals to expand their knowledge and skills throughout their careers.
- Establish mentorship and apprenticeship programs: Recognize the value of mutual learning opportunities and establish mentorship and apprenticeship programs within the healthcare sector. Carefully match experienced mentors with aspiring healthcare professionals to foster a culture of continuous learning. These programs should provide opportunities for skill development, knowledge transfer, and professional guidance, promoting a symbiotic relationship where both mentors and mentees can learn from each other.
- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Recognize the need to shift from traditional leadership approaches to innovative approaches that emphasize empathy, human connection, and empower leaders to show authentic and empathic leadership. Develop and implement comprehensive and continuous leadership development programs tailored specifically for healthcare managers. Focus on equipping leaders with essential skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment, aligning with the principles of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.
- Enhance medical and nursing education programs: Prioritize evaluations and critical assessments of the current educational programs for future physicians and nurses. This should include fostering bidirectional

collaborations and knowledge-sharing between universities and hospitals, through for example facilitating cross-hospital mentorship programs and interprofessional learning. In addition, stimulate cutting-edge technology and digital health education to ensure universities and hospitals are well-equipped to navigate the healthcare of the future.

Hospital / Institutional level

- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: Prioritize effective onboarding processes for enhanced career development and retention. Allocate resources and attention to comprehensive onboarding programs that support healthcare professionals in their initial period, ensuring they feel supported and valued from the beginning of their employment.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Stimulate development opportunities for healthcare workers and encourage lifelong learning by offering a flexible and comprehensive training program, that goes beyond traditional classroom settings by providing a variety of learning avenues. This program should encompass both technical and soft skills, encouraging healthcare professionals to engage in diverse learning experiences such as reading impactful books or staying updated with scientific articles. Provide these opportunities within working hours to balance personal and professional lives.
- Establish mentorship and apprenticeship programs: Recognize the importance of coaching the younger generations and prioritize the establishment of mentorship and apprenticeship programs. Carefully design these programs to match experienced mentors with aspiring healthcare professionals, with a particular focus on developing their coaching and guidance skills. Provide opportunities for skill development, bidirectional knowledge transfer between mentors and mentees, and professional guidance, empowering the next generation of healthcare professionals to excel in their roles.
- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Develop and implement comprehensive and continuous leadership development programs tailored specifically for healthcare managers, embracing innovative approaches that emphasize empathy, human connection, and empowering leaders to show authentic and empathic leadership. Emphasize their crucial role in shaping organizational culture and driving positive change. Regularly evaluate leaders' management styles and abilities, for example via a 360° scan.
- Enhance medical and nursing education programs: This recommendation should be addressed by both universities and hospitals. The hospitals should foster bidirectional collaborations and knowledge-sharing between students, trainees, as well as new and senior healthcare professionals to cultivate a safe work environment. In addition, this should include the integration of cutting-edge technology and embracing digital health education to equip students with the skills for the future healthcare systems.
- Implement periodic employee evaluations with constructive feedback: Implement regular individual interviews for staff to provide a platform for individual feedback, enhancing their sense of value and importance within the hospital. Encourage supervisors to actively promote possibilities and invest in employees' talents and ambitions.
- Explore personal career coaching programs: Explore the feasibility of implementing or offering access to a personal career coaching program. This program aims to provide support to individuals in their career advancement within the healthcare sector, either within the hospital setting or through external resources.
- Encourage peer supervision groups: Encourage the implementation of peer supervision groups focused on stress and mental health in the workplace. Prioritize debriefing sessions following traumatic events to improve participants' well-being and mitigate the negative impact of stress.

Regulation

Governmental level

- Implement healthcare worker-to-patient ratios: This policy intervention addresses the pressing need for adequate staffing levels, which is a global concern. By setting specific healthcare worker-to-patient ratios using patient-centred approaches, healthcare organizations can ensure that physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers have manageable workloads, allowing them to provide high-quality care.
- Implement a national care severity measurement tool: This tool will enable the measurement and allocation of tasks and workload in healthcare organizations. This instrument should serve as a standardized benchmark at the local level, facilitating comparisons between healthcare providers and networks. In addition, measures to address workload and task allocation issues in the workplace could be implemented, such as regular reviews of job roles and responsibilities and effective delegation of tasks.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Enact policies that encourage a culture of flat management in healthcare to enhance communication and feedback processes. This can be achieved by reducing hierarchies and streamlining bureaucratic procedures, thereby facilitating a direct and open exchange of feedback among healthcare professionals. This may involve revising existing administrative structures, promoting team-based decision-making, providing training on effective communication and feedback techniques, and re-evaluating the traditional departmental structures to create a more agile and trust-based environment where organizations invest in empowering frontline workers and promote self-management.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Identify tasks that can be automated or delegated to administrative staff and enable healthcare professionals to prioritize patient care. Embrace a shift in perspective, reducing redundant documentation and unnecessary registrations. Consider adopting a new approach, where documentation focuses on deviations from the established care plan rather than duplicative reporting.
- Implement comprehensive strategies to address discrimination and bullying in the healthcare sector: This should include investing in initiatives that promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, and psychological safety among healthcare professionals. Policies can include establishing zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and bullying, providing training on diversity and inclusion, developing reporting mechanisms for incidents, and ensuring appropriate consequences for offenders. Additionally, resources should be allocated to support the well-being and mental health of healthcare teams, including access to counselling services and stress management programs.
- Foster collaboration and dialogue among stakeholders: Foster coordination and alignment between the federal government and regional communities. Establish mechanisms for regular communication and collaboration to ensure harmonization and shared responsibility of policies, strategies, and initiatives across different levels of governance. By enhancing cooperation and coordination, we can work towards a more integrated and effective healthcare system that meets the needs of the population and maximizes resources.

Hospital / Institutional level

- Monitor the workload and working hours regularly: Track overtime hours, staff shortages, and unused vacation days to make adjustments in workload, care volumes, and staff reintegration.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Develop a culture of flat management to improve communication and feedback processes. Reduce hierarchical layers and bureaucratic procedures, allowing healthcare professionals to exchange feedback directly. This could also include setting up an advisory board with management and representatives from healthcare workers, and re-evaluating the traditional departmental structures to create a more agile and trust-based environment where organizations invest in empowering frontline workers and promote self-management.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Identify tasks that can be automated or delegated to administrative staff and enable healthcare professionals to prioritize patient care. Embrace a shift in perspective, reducing redundant documentation and unnecessary registrations.

Consider adopting a new approach, where documentation focuses on deviations from the established care plan rather than duplicative reporting.

- Implement comprehensive strategies to address discrimination and bullying in the healthcare sector: Allocate resources and adopt comprehensive strategies that foster a culture of respect, inclusivity, and psychological safety within healthcare organizations.

Financial and Infrastructural

Governmental level

- Foster investments in tailored technological innovations in healthcare: Foster investments in technological innovations in healthcare tailored to the needs of patients and healthcare workers. Instead of purely experimental approaches, investments should be targeted towards developing technologies that directly cater to the needs of users and address existing healthcare demands. For instance, invest in technologies that automate administrative tasks and simplify registration processes. Additionally, explore innovative solutions such as speech recognition and speech technology to enhance documentation and communication, but also investigate wearables, remote monitoring, virtual consultations, and artificial intelligence.
- Implement a fair and competitive salary structure: Establish a comprehensive and equitable compensation system that fairly remunerates healthcare professionals for the challenges and irregularities of their work schedules. This includes providing appropriate financial incentives for working during nights, weekends, and holidays, ensuring parity with other demanding professions such as firefighting and policing. Prioritize recognizing the unique demands of healthcare professionals and compensating them accordingly for their valuable contributions.
- Support employee transportation needs: Organize transportation services or provide financial support to employees who have to commute long distances for work. Explore options to offer public transport benefits or subsidies to ease the transportation burden for healthcare workers, ensuring they have reliable and affordable commuting options.

Hospital / Institutional level

- Support employee transportation needs: Organize transportation services or provide financial support to employees who have to commute long distances for work. Explore options for shared vehicles, such as vans or cars for carpooling among healthcare workers. Implement flexible solutions that accommodate different schedules and needs, fostering positive work relationships and improving the work atmosphere.
- Fostering a positive and enjoyable atmosphere: Implement initiatives aimed at fostering a positive and enjoyable atmosphere within the healthcare setting. Organize after-work activities, driven by stakeholders such as HR departments, healthcare workers, or external entities, to enhance workplace satisfaction.
- Create accessible recreational spaces and activities: Create and promote accessible and feasible recreational spaces and activities for hospital staff, such as gyms, quiet rooms, and yoga classes. Ensure availability during and outside of work hours to support the well-being of employees. Introduce greenery in the hospital environment to improve the overall ambiance and well-being of workers. Encourage and facilitate the use of these spaces and activities to promote a healthy work-life balance.

The Netherlands

Professional and personal support

Governmental level

- Support flexibility in the timetable: Allow flexibility and control over the working hours of healthcare professionals through a clear legislative framework. In addition, facilities outside the hospital (e.g. day-care) should be available to support flexible working hours. More flexibility will promote work-life balance and support overall well-being of healthcare professionals.

- Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services: Enable psychological support and remove boundaries to seek help, for the overall population, and healthcare workers in particular. For example, awareness programs in work places can help reduce stigma surrounding seeking support, fostering a culture of open dialogue and empathy.
- Encourage the deployment of care assistants, medical students or others: Establish policies to reinforce healthcare workers and allow them to focus on their core patient-related duties. Efforts should be made to promote unity and ongoing involvement of the deployed staff. This could require coordination and collaboration among various healthcare institutions and regulatory bodies. An example is the *Nationale Zorgreserve* (national healthcare reserve) that matches healthcare reservists with healthcare organizations to contribute to the continuity of care during emergencies in the Netherlands. This initiative should be supported on a governmental level to enable a broad-scale systematic implementation.
- Incorporate a more flexible and diverse workforce: Establish guidelines and frameworks to implement a flexible staffing model (e.g. a flex pool). In addition, the national government should ensure coordination and collaboration among healthcare authorities, regulatory bodies and professional associations. This could involve developing policies that support the inclusion of a larger pool of individuals who actively choose flexibility in their work hours.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: This can be achieved by promoting initiatives that encourage organizations to show appreciation and recognition (e.g. awareness campaigns such as recognition days) towards employees. National efforts should prioritize acknowledging the contributions of healthcare professionals and foster a culture of appreciation within the healthcare sector.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Support flexibility in the timetable: Take personal needs of the employees into account when scheduling working hours. In the current digital world, hospitals should use automated timetable programme that can accommodate staff availability and preferences, which can prevent creating rigid and unrealistic schedules. It is also recommended to review the timetables for assistants, who have higher staff turnover and less flexibility in their schedules.
- Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services: Offer psychological counselling by an independent confidant to those who need it, and organise social activities (i.e. teambuilding) as it can be an easy and effective way to improve mental health and well-being for many people. In addition, peer supervision groups or a personal coach on mental health and well-being could provide a platform to release tension and share experiences.
- Encourage the deployment of care assistants, medical students or others: Develop specific protocols, guidelines and job descriptions to reinforce healthcare workers and allow them to focus on their core patient-related duties. Ensure that the extra workers are trained and equipped to perform a broad range of tasks, including supplementing the department and performing medical procedures. This program can serve as an effective solution for workload management during peak periods, enabling efficient distribution and allocation of tasks.
- Incorporate a more flexible and diverse workforce: Adapt staffing strategies and practices to considering individual preferences and skills, across institutions. Additionally, hospitals could create department-specific flex pools with specialised nurses who fit into their respective departments and can be deployed for specific tasks, such as chemotherapy in oncology departments. This approach will not only help alleviate staffing shortages during extreme peaks but also improve efficiency and patient care by matching staff with the appropriate skills to the tasks at hand. In addition, discussing and accommodating longer career breaks should be able to be discussed to a healthy support work-life balance.
- Prioritize team and conflict management: Facilitate communication through regularly communicating changes to systems and processes. In addition, consider implementing feedback mechanisms to allow staff to provide input on the impact of these changes on their work and the work of their colleagues. This feedback

can be used to inform future decision-making and help to ensure that changes are implemented in a way that minimises disruption and maximises efficiency.

- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: Management should regularly show appreciation to healthcare staff, not only through big rewards or gifts, but also through sincere words and small gestures such as a weekly fruit basket. In addition, implement a reward system that acknowledges and motivates healthcare workers who take on additional responsibilities or roles outside of their job scope. This reward system should not only include financial incentives, but could also consist of alternative rewards such as additional time off or opportunities for training and development. For example, the department could receive Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) for the purpose of training additional personnel.

Education

Governmental level

- Foster cross-hospital knowledge sharing: Gain knowledge from strategies and interventions implemented on national, European and International level. For instance, how they conduct their annual conversations or what other innovative ways do they implement to use all expertise and talents of their staff to the full potential. An example could be to examine the implementation of a national electronic patient record in other countries.
- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: New employees should be supported and guided during the settling-in period. The national government should encourage this by facilitating collaboration with educational institutions and regional parties (e.g. *Sigra Voor Betere Zorg VBZ, Rotterdamse Zorg*).
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Invest in personal development by improving the supporting conditions and including this in the collective labour agreement. Provide an annual budget to spend on professional development of healthcare workers. In addition, departments should be able to allocate dedicated time for working groups and projects. This time should be scheduled in advance and provided during work hours to ensure that employees have the opportunity to contribute to departmental initiatives without compromising their regular workload.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Foster cross-hospital knowledge sharing: Encouraging hospitals to share lessons learned to ensure continuous improvement and innovation. Hospitals should gain knowledge from strategies and interventions implemented on national, European and International level. For instance, how they conduct their annual conversations or what other innovative ways do they implement to use all expertise and talents of their staff to the full potential. An example could be to facilitate exchange of employees between other hospitals.
- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: Experienced employees should be encouraged to volunteer as mentors and incentivise participation in supporting new employees. The effectiveness of the programme should be evaluated periodically to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the mentees and mentors, taking generational differences into account. The expectations should be transparent by providing a clear job profile and manuals that are department-specific. In addition, buddy programs should be established where employees are paired with colleagues from different departments who started their positions around the same time. This initiative aims to foster a sense of community within the hospital environment.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Organise personal development conversations. These can include multiple topics, such as internal mobility, university trainings or combi-jobs. The facilitator of these conversations should not be the immediate supervisor, but rather someone who can think in overarching ways in all areas of the hospital. This is to avoid the potential risk that a

supervisor wants to keep their staff within that department. The initiative should come from the employer and should take place annually.

Regulation

Governmental level

- Implement a national care severity measurement tool: To achieve proper recognition of the challenges faced by the departments, it is crucial to accurately assess the workload in emergency rooms and the other departments. The national government should acknowledge the magnitude of the problem and find solutions to improve emergency room services. A first step is to recognise the challenges by the implementation of a national care severity measurement.
- Stimulate combi-jobs: Combi-jobs are a type of employment that involves performing different tasks or roles within the same organization and allows a person to have multiple job titles or positions. The national government should encourage this by providing more flexibility in the education system, facilitating co-operation between different institutions, and establishing appropriate financial compensation standards.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary burden on individuals and organizations. This could be achieved by reviewing and simplifying processes to streamline and reduce administrative work to what is necessary.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Organise regular occasions for management to visit the work floor. This will enable them to gain insight into the daily care provided by nurses and actively involve nurses in decision-making processes that affect patient care. By including healthcare workers in decision-making, hospital management can ensure that their policies and procedures reflect the needs and realities of patient care on the ground, ultimately improving the quality of care provided to patients.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Stimulate combi-jobs: Combi-jobs are a type of employment that involves performing different tasks or roles within the same organization and allows a person to have multiple job titles or positions. Hospitals should break boundaries between departments within the hospital, and not trying to keep people within their department, but thinking in terms of possibilities. One example was mentioned where a surgery nurse could work in oncology one month, and surgery the next.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary burden on individuals and organizations. This could be achieved by reviewing and simplifying processes to streamline and reduce administrative work to what is necessary.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Establish a mechanism to involve healthcare workers in decisions regarding patient care, including digitisation processes. This could be achieved by creating opportunities for healthcare workers to voice their opinions and concerns, such as through regular meetings between management and staff or by having a representative participate in management meetings. The initiative *Actieplan Zeggenschap* (Action plan for empowerment) offers tangible tools for healthcare professionals, managers and executives to strengthen empowerment.

Financial and infrastructural

Governmental level

- Support employee transportation needs: Organize transportation services or provide financial support to employees who have to commute long distances for work. Explore options to offer public transport benefits or subsidies to ease the transportation burden for healthcare workers, ensuring they have reliable and affordable commuting options.
- Allow flexibility to allocate funds: The national government should allow more flexibility to spend funds on initiatives that improve conditions for healthcare professionals. For example, funds should be less restricted to fixed categories and compartments, with specific allocations for different purposes. Instead, the funds

should be allocated to hospitals within a legal framework, and within hospitals, departments should have the flexibility to allocate the budget in a way that they believe is beneficial for their respective teams.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Support employee transportation needs: Organize transportation services or provide financial support to employees who have to commute long distances for work. Explore options for shared vehicles, such as vans or cars for carpooling among healthcare workers. Implement flexible solutions that accommodate different schedules and needs, fostering positive work relationships and improving the work atmosphere.
- Allow flexibility to allocate funds: Each department should be allowed to utilize the annual budget allocated to the department creatively according to their specific needs. This would provide more freedom for management to participate in initiatives they deem suitable for their departments to improve conditions for healthcare professionals.
- Create accessible recreational spaces and activities: Hospitals should have spaces that allow healthcare professionals to relax, connect with colleagues, and recharge during their demanding schedules. By creating such spaces, hospitals can foster a positive work culture and improve the overall well-being, job satisfaction and performance of their staff.

Italy

Professional and personal support

Governmental level

- Address national-level human resource issues: Address human resource issues at the national level, considering funding, rules, and contractual relationships to ensure a stable and supportive environment for healthcare professionals. By ensuring adequate funding, fair rules, and favourable contractual relationships, healthcare organizations can create an environment that supports and values their workforce.
- Foster interprofessional collaborations: Organize regular interprofessional team meetings crossing hospital and regional boundaries to share best practices and lessons learned. Encourage open communication and collaboration among healthcare professionals to improve teamwork and resolve issues.
- Support flexibility in the timetable: Allow flexibility in the working hours of healthcare professionals through a clear legislative framework. In addition, facilities outside the hospital (e.g. day-care) should be available to support flexible working hours. More flexibility will promote work-life balance and support overall well-being of healthcare professionals.
- Strengthen teamwork accountability in hospitals: Implement a process of teamwork accountability in hospitals by defining clear roles and responsibilities. Provide guidelines and support at the regional and national levels to facilitate standardized procedures and ongoing efforts in hospitals.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: This can be achieved by promoting initiatives that encourage organizations to show appreciation and recognition (e.g. awareness campaigns such as recognition days) towards employees. National efforts should prioritize acknowledging the contributions of healthcare professionals and foster a culture of appreciation within the healthcare sector.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Prioritize team and conflict management: Organize regular interprofessional team meetings to analyse and address team problems. Encourage open communication and collaboration among employees to identify solutions and strategies for improving teamwork. These meetings should be held periodically to foster a more cohesive work environment.
- Foster interprofessional collaborations: Establish regular communication channels and team meetings that include various types of healthcare workers to promote interprofessional collaboration. Hospitals can achieve this through systematic interprofessional team meetings or by creating opportunities from staff from different departments to work together on joint projects.

- Support flexibility in the timetable: Prioritize the development of feasible and flexible schedules that consider employees' individual needs. Consider independent or team-level timetabling, provide clear and well-planned schedules in advance, and establish contingency plans for unexpected events.
- Strengthen teamwork accountability in hospitals: Implement a process of teamwork accountability by defining clear roles and responsibilities for each team member. Establish effective communication channels to ensure everyone is on the same page, especially during high-pressure situations. Promote a collaborative work environment and prevent confusion.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: Show appreciation and recognition for physicians' and nurses' work. Implement (non-)financial rewards and recognition programs to increase motivation and job satisfaction.

Education

Governmental level

- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: Provide a framework or guidelines to implement interventions for sociocultural integration and onboarding in the workplace, particularly for non-resident individuals. Conduct pre- and post-implementation assessments to understand the effectiveness of interventions in promoting adaptation and sustainable job retention. Allocate resources and attention to create a supportive and valued environment from the start.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Recognize the importance of lifelong learning and stimulate continuous professional development and growth opportunities for healthcare staff. By providing a variety of learning avenues, we can create a culture that values ongoing learning and enables healthcare professionals to expand their knowledge and skills throughout their careers.
- Promote transparent recruitment and career advancement: Establish transparent and merit-based recruitment and career advancement processes in the healthcare sector. Prevent rewarding individuals based on political connections and ensure the selection of the best candidates for job opportunities and career growth. Collaborate with local authorities, hospitals, and trade unions to implement these processes effectively.
- Prioritize competency-based leadership selection: Prioritize the selection of leaders based on competencies rather than seniority or political connections. Advocate for transparent selection processes, equal opportunities, and diversity in leadership, while emphasizing accountability through performance evaluations.
- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Develop and implement comprehensive and continuous leadership development programs tailored specifically for healthcare managers, emphasizing the crucial role they play in shaping organizational culture and driving positive change. These programs should focus on equipping leaders with essential skills, such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals: Implement interventions for sociocultural integration and onboarding in the workplace. Monitor mental health status and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in improving well-being. Consider team-building activities involving social and cultural events to enhance sociocultural integration among workers.
- Implement periodic employee evaluations with constructive feedback: Identify healthcare workers' needs for skill improvement. Provide specific trainings tailored to meet these needs and support professional development. Establish a dedicated team responsible for developing and organizing trainings within each hospital.

- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: Organise personal development conversations. These can include multiple topics, such as internal mobility, university trainings or combi-jobs.
- Prioritize competency-based leadership selection: Prioritize the selection of good leaders based on competencies rather than seniority or political connections to foster a positive work environment. This includes transparent selection processes, emphasizing qualifications and relevant experience, while promoting diversity and inclusion within hospital leadership
- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Develop and implement comprehensive and continuous leadership development programs tailored specifically for healthcare managers, emphasizing the crucial role they play in shaping organizational culture and driving positive change. In addition, it is recommended that organizations implement regular evaluations of their leaders' management styles and abilities.
- Avoid assigning too many duties to a single person lacking the proper qualifications: Ensure employees are adequately trained and qualified for their assigned duties to enhance job satisfaction and performance.

Regulation

Governmental level

- Implement healthcare worker-to-patient ratios: This policy intervention addresses the pressing need for adequate staffing levels, which is a global concern. By setting specific healthcare worker-to-patient ratios using patient-centred approaches, healthcare organizations can ensure that physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers have manageable workloads, allowing them to provide high-quality care.
- Implement a comprehensive medical risk monitoring and management: Establish a system for regular monitoring of sentinel events and healthcare workers' exposure to medical errors. This approach will enhance patient and healthcare worker safety through effective risk management.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Reduce non-patient administrative work to alleviate bureaucratic burdens on physicians and nurses. Provide secretarial services to handle the paperwork for physicians and alleviate pressure. Prioritize workload adjustment according to staff capacity to improve healthcare service quality and professionals' quality of life.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Involve healthcare workers in decision-making processes and address their needs to maintain motivation. Understand employee needs and provide support, such as flexible work schedules.
- Address medical deserts and retaining healthcare providers: Raise awareness among stakeholders, including physicians, scientific societies, civil society, and social organizations, regarding medical deserts and dissatisfied healthcare workers in certain regions. Invest in medical infrastructure and facilities in underserved areas to attract and retain healthcare providers. Develop tailored solutions reflecting the unique needs of each community to improve access to healthcare for all.

Hospital/Institutional level

- Prioritize fixed-term contracts for stability: Within the hospital, prioritize offering fixed-term contracts to physicians and nurses instead of temporary arrangements. By providing stable employment, healthcare professionals will have the necessary security to plan their future and make meaningful investments in their careers.
- Implement a comprehensive medical risk monitoring and management: This system should include regular monitoring of sentinel events and workers' exposure to medical errors. Ensure patient and healthcare worker safety through effective risk management.
- Monitor the workload and working hours regularly: Track overtime hours, staff shortages, and unused vacation days to make adjustments in workload, care volumes, and staff reintegration.

- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Reduce bureaucratic burdens on healthcare workers by minimizing non-patient administrative work. Provide secretarial services to handle paperwork for physicians and improve service quality. Prioritize workload adjustment according to staff capacity to enhance healthcare service quality and professionals' quality of life.
- Foster a culture of flat management: Involve healthcare workers in decision-making processes and address their needs to maintain motivation.

Financial & Infrastructure

Governmental level

- Implement a fair and competitive salary structure: Establish a fair and competitive salary structure that distributes benefits equally among the hospital staff. Implement a salary system that rewards and provides bonuses within financial constraints.
- Address shortages in tools and equipment to enhance healthcare service quality: Provide adequate resources and equipment to healthcare workers to improve job retention and satisfaction, including modern medical devices, advanced technology and up-to-date medical supplies.

Hospital/institutional level

- Implement a fair and competitive salary structure: Set up a fair and competitive salary structure, including meal vouchers, or other benefits should be distributed across the hospital staff.
- Provide adequate resources and equipment to healthcare workers: This includes modern medical devices, advanced technology, and up-to-date medical supplies.
- Foster a positive and enjoyable atmosphere: Implement strategies aimed at fostering a positive and enjoyable atmosphere within the healthcare setting through the organization of, for example, after-work activities. This initiative can be driven by multiple stakeholders, including the hospital's Human Resources (HR) department, healthcare workers themselves, or external entities.

Poland

Professional and personal support

Governmental level

- Foster interprofessional collaborations: Organize regular interprofessional team meetings crossing hospital and regional boundaries to share best practices and lessons learned. Encourage open communication and collaboration among healthcare professionals to improve teamwork and resolve issues. These meetings should be conducted periodically to identify areas for improvement and foster a more cohesive work environment.
- Support flexibility in the timetable: Allow flexibility in the working hours of healthcare professionals through a clear legislative framework. In addition, facilities outside the hospital (e.g. day-care) should be stimulated to support flexible working hours.
- Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services: Prioritize and invest in safe and centralized psychological support services. This includes ensuring easy access and confidentiality for those in need, particularly healthcare professionals.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: Efforts should be undertaken to address aggression and reluctance towards healthcare professionals at a societal level. This can be achieved through targeted education campaigns aimed at promoting respect and appreciation for healthcare professionals. These campaigns should educate patients about their rights and obligations and establish clear expectations of acceptable behaviour in healthcare settings.

Hospital/institutional level

- Prioritize team and conflict management: Team and conflict management to retain employees and prevent personnel problems should be prioritized. People management specialists should be allocated to foster mutual respect, division of labour, and cooperation among all department members, including the department head, ward head nurse, and medical and nursing teams.
- Foster interprofessional collaboration: Regular communication channels and team meetings that include various types of healthcare workers should be established. This will facilitate problem analysis, solution finding, and strategy development. Utilizing group support (e.g. Balint groups) can also enhance teamwork. Emphasis should be placed on creating an environment of mutual respect, trust, and confidence, especially between nurses and physicians. In addition, clear guidelines and protocols for professional behaviour and patient communication within the hospital should be established.
- Support flexibility in the timetable: Greater flexibility should be offered in the work schedules of healthcare workers, allowing them to accommodate important personal commitments like medical appointments.
- Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services: The accessibility of psychological support services for healthcare professionals must be prioritized. Standards for psychological work with healthcare professionals should be developed, and a triage system should be implemented to effectively prioritize and allocate therapists.
- Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals: Show appreciation and recognition towards employees by providing small gifts or tokens of appreciation on special occasions such as holidays, work anniversaries, or celebrating successes.

Education

Governmental level

- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Develop and implement comprehensive and continuous leadership development programs tailored specifically for healthcare managers, emphasizing the crucial role they play in shaping organizational culture and driving positive change. These programs should focus on equipping leaders with essential skills, such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: The government should invest in personal development by improving the supporting conditions and including this in the collective labour agreement.

Hospital/institutional level

- Prioritize recruitment and succession planning: The recruitment process, particularly addressing the age structure issue within the healthcare workforce, should be prioritized. With a significant aging population of healthcare professionals, efforts should be made to attract and retain younger professionals. Incentives, training programs, and career advancement opportunities can be utilized to attract and engage younger talent. Strategic partnerships with educational institutions can facilitate a steady influx of new professionals.
- Provide training and support for managing incidents of verbal abuse and aggression: Training programs and support should be offered to healthcare workers on effectively managing incidents of verbal abuse and aggression. This can include providing de-escalation training and developing effective communication strategies to handle such situations in a professional and safe manner.
- Implement periodic employee evaluations with constructive feedback: A system of regular employee evaluations that provide constructive feedback should be established. This will enable employers to assess employee performance, offer guidance for improvement, and promote continuous learning and development.

- Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs: Training programs should be offered for leaders, supervisors, and management to strengthen their management, leadership, and teamwork skills. It is common for healthcare leaders to lack experience and skills in managing teams.
- Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff: The needs and professional ambitions of healthcare workers should be actively listened to, promoting their motivation and engagement. This can be achieved by providing opportunities for both internal and external training that focus on technical as well as soft skills. Recognizing the time constraints faced by healthcare workers, efforts should be made to allocate sufficient time and resources for their continuous education and professional growth.
- Promote digital literacy and support for staff members: A comprehensive strategy should be developed to promote digital literacy among staff members, particularly older staff members who may be resistant to using computers. This strategy should include targeted training programs, access to technical assistance, and considerations for ergonomic concerns to ensure staff members' well-being. Additionally, hospitals should explore and implement technological advancements that improve the functionality and user-friendliness of electronic documentation systems. This will facilitate the transition from paper records to electronic documentation, streamline processes, and enhance efficiency within healthcare facilities.

Regulation

Governmental level

- Implement healthcare worker-to-patient ratios: This policy intervention addresses the pressing need for adequate staffing levels, which is a global concern. By setting specific healthcare worker-to-patient ratios using patient-centred approaches, healthcare organizations can ensure that physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers have manageable workloads, allowing them to provide high-quality care.
- Protect healthcare workers against verbal abuse and aggression: The protection of healthcare workers from verbal abuse and aggression in healthcare settings should be ensured. This can be achieved by establishing clear policies and legislations that define unacceptable behaviour and outline appropriate consequences for those who engage in such actions.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: A comprehensive review of reporting processes in the healthcare sector should be conducted to alleviate the administrative burden on healthcare professionals. By assessing the necessity and relevance of each reporting category, opportunities to streamline and simplify reporting processes can be identified. Redundant or unnecessary reports should be eliminated, reducing the administrative burden on healthcare professionals.

Hospital/institutional level

- Protect healthcare workers against verbal abuse and aggression: Clear guidelines on how to address verbal abuse and aggression within the healthcare setting should be established. These guidelines should emphasize the zero-tolerance policy towards such behaviour and provide protocols for handling incidents.
- Minimize bureaucratic and administrative burdens on healthcare workers: Reduce bureaucratic burdens on healthcare workers by minimizing non-patient administrative work. Provide secretarial services to handle paperwork for physicians and improve service quality.

Financial and infrastructural

Governmental level

- Implement a fair and competitive salary structure: The national government should conduct a comprehensive review of the pay structure in the healthcare sector and implement an effective bonus system that rewards employees based on multiple factors, including efficiency, contributions to the team, and seniority. Transparency and clarity around salaries should be increased by providing salary ranges for specific positions or average salaries for positions in different healthcare institutions. A fair and consistent pay structure should be established to promote employee retention and satisfaction. Additionally, fair

compensation should be ensured for overtime work, and healthcare workers should not be pressured into working overtime without appropriate compensation or time off.

Hospital/institutional level

- Streamline documentation processes and promote electronic documentation systems: Documentation processes should be streamlined by promoting the use of electronic documentation systems. This can be achieved by providing sufficient resources, such as an adequate number of computers, and ensuring that the electronic documentation system is user-friendly and efficient.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy brief demonstrates that the retention of healthcare workers can be improved by the implementation of a comprehensive approach that combines professional and personal support, educational interventions, financial provisions, and regulatory enhancements. This approach should prioritize patient-centricity, and encompass the involvement of all healthcare workers, both clinical and non-clinical. In addition, the successful implementation of these policy recommendations requires active engagement and concerted action from both hospitals and the national policy level. Hospitals and institutes play a crucial role in providing professional support, career development opportunities, and developing a positive work culture, while at the governmental levels, regulatory changes, financial incentives, and support for interprofessional collaboration are pivotal to address systemic challenges. By synergistically aligning efforts at both levels, we can foster an environment that values, rewards, and provides professional development for healthcare workers, ultimately leading to better care for patients.

Next steps

This policy brief has provided valuable insights into the perspectives of various stakeholders, including physicians, nurses, health assistants, hospital management and policy makers from four European countries. Adopting a bottom-up approach, this policy brief closely aligns with the data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the sentiments among these stakeholders.

To further advance this work, the next steps will involve comparing and validating these findings through a thorough literature review, assessing the impact of specific interventions and implemented policies on the mental well-being and job retention of healthcare workers, both clinical and non-clinical. This step is crucial to gain a broader understanding of the effectiveness of the proposed interventions and assign relative importance to each, while also considering a patient-centred approach as a priority.

Additionally, a comparative analysis will explore the cross-country implications of the recommendations, identifying common themes and contextual variations across the four countries. While the brief has presented a breakdown by country, this analysis will provide a deeper exploration of similarities and differences between them.

The synthesized findings, along with the literature review and the cross-country comparative analysis, will be compiled into a scientific publication, to be submitted to a high-impact journal subject to rigorous peer review, aiming to disseminate the knowledge and inform evidence-based policy decisions in the healthcare sector. This publication will represent a significant contribution to the field and aid in fostering a collaborative and well-supported environment for healthcare workers, ultimately leading to improved patient care and workforce satisfaction.

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