

METEOR POLICY BRIEF – Belgium

Mental Health: Focus on Retention of Healthcare Workers



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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 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

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.

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. 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.

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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