

METEOR POLICY BRIEF – Italy

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

- 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.

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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