METEOR POLICY BRIEF – The Netherlands
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

- 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

- <u>Support flexibility in the timetable</u>: 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.

- <u>Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services</u>: 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.

- <u>Encourage the deployment of care assistants, medical students or others</u>: 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.

- <u>Incorporate a more flexible and diverse workforce</u>: 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.

- <u>Prioritize team and conflict management</u>: 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.

- <u>Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals</u>: 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

- <u>Foster cross-hospital knowledge sharing</u>: 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.

- <u>Prioritize comprehensive onboarding for healthcare professionals</u>: 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.

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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