METEOR POLICY BRIEF – Poland

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

- <u>Foster interprofessional collaborations</u>: 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.
- <u>Support flexibility in the timetable</u>: 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.
- <u>Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services</u>: Prioritize and invest in safe and centralized psychological support services. This includes ensuring easy access and confidentiality for those in need, particularly healthcare professionals.
- <u>Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals</u>: 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

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

- <u>Support flexibility in the timetable</u>: Greater flexibility should be offered in the work schedules of healthcare workers, allowing them to accommodate important personal commitments like medical appointments.
- <u>Establish accessible and confidential psychological support services</u>: 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.
- <u>Prioritize recognition and appreciation of healthcare professionals:</u> 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

- <u>Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs</u>: 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.
- <u>Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff</u>: The government should invest in personal development by improving the supporting conditions and including this in the collective labour agreement.

Hospital/institutional level

- <u>Prioritize recruitment and succession planning</u>: 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.
- <u>Provide training and support for managing incidents of verbal abuse and aggression</u>: 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.
- <u>Implement periodic employee evaluations with constructive feedback</u>: 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.
- <u>Develop and implement comprehensive leadership development programs</u>: 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.
- <u>Facilitate growth opportunities and lifelong learning for healthcare staff</u>: 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.
- <u>Promote digital literacy and support for staff members</u>: 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. 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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This project was funded by the European Union's Health Programme (2014 - 2020).