



SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

Understanding and Enhancing
Healthcare Worker Retention in Europe

INTRODUCTION

Project METEOR (Mental Health: Focused on Retention of Healthcare Workers) aimed to understand why workers in European Union health professions decide to leave their jobs and what can be done to keep them. Through comprehensive reviews of existing literature, surveys, and workshops with healthcare professionals, hospital managers, policymakers, and other experts, we assessed the magnitude of the retention problem, identified key reasons behind intentions to leave, and explored strategies to enhance job retention. While our research primarily focused on four European countries—Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland—our recommendations are universal and applicable for healthcare providers and policymakers across Europe and beyond who are aiming to mitigate the labour shortage in the healthcare sector.

This project, co-funded by the 3rd Health Programme of the European Union, spanned from 2021 to 2024, involving institutions such as Belgian university KU Leuven, the Medical University of Silesia (SUM), the University of Palermo (UNIPA), Spaarne Gasthuis, Aldgate Strategy Group, and the Center for Training & Research in Public Health (CEFPAS).



IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHCARE WORKER RETENTION

The retention of healthcare workers is crucial due to the deepening shortage of professionals. Despite having more physicians, nurses, and primary care workers than ever before, Europe faces increasing demand for these professionals driven by an ageing population and the increasing prevalence of chronic disorders. [The World Health Organization](#) estimates that the European region currently faces a deficit of 1.8 million health workers, projected to double to 4 million by 2030 without corrective action.

High turnover rates in healthcare institutions adversely affect hospitals, patients, and healthcare providers alike. Hospitals incur higher recruiting costs, while frequent personnel changes reduce the quality of care, leading to increased medical errors and mortality rates. Additionally, high turnover diminishes productivity and morale among remaining employees, exacerbating the cycle of resignations.

To understand the extent of this challenge and the underlying reasons prompting healthcare workers to consider leaving their positions, researchers from **METEOR** used quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment.



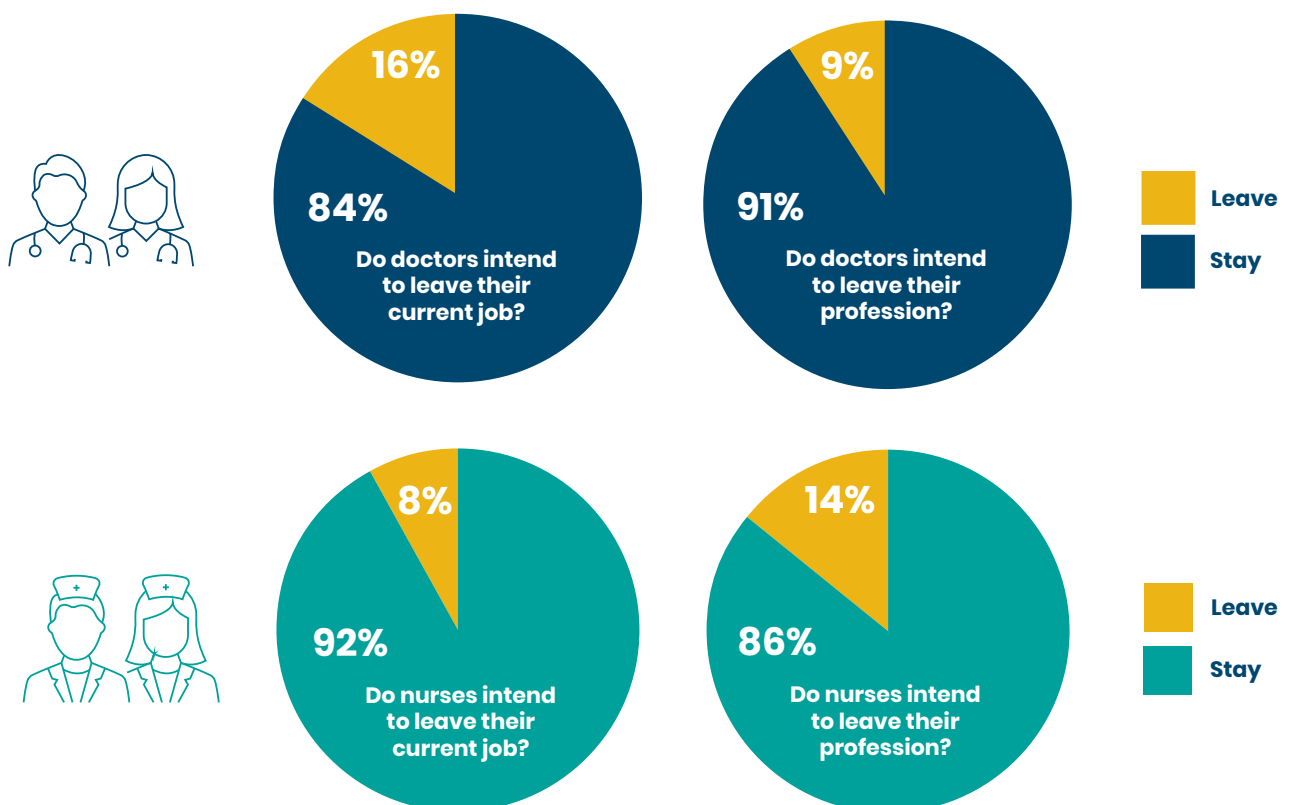
SCALE OF THE RETENTION PROBLEM

In a survey conducted among the staff of eight hospitals in four countries, **METEOR** researchers found that 9% of doctors and nearly 14% of nurses expressed their intention to leave their profession, citing low job satisfaction, growing depersonalisation, and emotional exhaustion as the primary factors influencing their decisions.

The survey also revealed that a significant share of healthcare professionals is dissatisfied with their current employers. Dissatisfaction is higher among medical doctors, 16.3% of whom are considering leaving their current jobs. Among nurses, 8.4% intend to leave their current employer.

According to **METEOR** data, more nurses want to quit their profession altogether rather than switch to a different workplace. This is largely due to the significant deterioration in working conditions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in all healthcare facilities. Nurses are feeling overwhelmed and stressed by the challenges of coping with death, facing stigma, and worrying about the risk of infection.

Figure 1: More nurses than doctors intend to leave their profession, while doctors are more likely to want to change employers



FACTORS INFLUENCING HEALTHCARE WORKERS TO STAY

METEOR researchers identified three crucial factors preventing medical doctors and nurses from leaving their jobs: job satisfaction, a clear career development path, and a healthy work-life balance.

Job satisfaction emerges as a significant factor encouraging individuals to remain in their roles, whereas dissatisfaction tends to drive them away.

Opportunities for career development, including educational support, chances for growth, and positive career experiences, positively influence retention for nurses and physicians. Conversely, a lack of challenges, limited career development opportunities, and perceived incompetence can increase the intention to leave.

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is associated with staying, while imbalance reduces the desire to remain in a role. Conflicts between work and family responsibilities negatively impact the intention to stay.

“The fact that such a large number of medical staff is thinking about quitting their jobs is worrying, but our research shows that it’s possible to reverse their thinking and convince them to stay. We found that if hospital managers want to prevent nurses and doctors from quitting their jobs, they should take a closer look at job satisfaction, make sure that their work-life balance is secured and that they can see a clear career development path,” said **METEOR** researcher Neeltje de Vries, an expert in nursing science from Spaarne Gasthuis.





STEPS HOSPITALS CAN TAKE TO RETAIN MEDICAL PERSONNEL

METEOR researchers analysed 12 areas where hospital management can focus their efforts: onboarding, transition programmes to different units, stress coping tools, social support, extra staffing, coping with patient care demands, fostering positive work relationships, providing development opportunities and departmental resources, improving the job environment, optimising work organisation, enhancing recruitment approaches, and adopting technological innovations.

The analysis shows the effectiveness of onboarding and mentorship programs for doctors and nurses in reducing turnover rates. Such programs are particularly important for nurses at the beginning of their career path, as more than 50% of newly graduated nurses leave their jobs within the first year due to culture shock. Data reveals that new generations require more support in their workplace compared to previous ones.

The introduction of initiatives helping nurses and medical doctors to cope with stress has also proven successful. Such initiatives can take the form of empowerment sessions, development of guidelines for self-care, and stress reduction tactics.

METEOR confirmed earlier findings that salary is not the primary reason for leaving healthcare in high-income countries.

Figure 2: Ways to retain medical staff

Areas hospital management can address to retain staff	onboarding
	stress coping tools
	transition programme to a different unit
	social support
	extra staffing
	coping with patient care demands
	fostering positive work relationships
	development opportunities & department resources
	improving job environment
	optimising work organisation
	enhancing recruitment approach
	adoption of technological innovations

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our collaboration with physicians, nurses, health assistants, hospital management, and policymakers, we formulated policy recommendations targeting four areas influencing decisions to stay:

- **PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL SUPPORT:** Create a supportive and collaborative work environment promoting professional growth and well-being.
- **EDUCATION:** Provide various training and development programmes to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies, while supporting career opportunities.
- **REGULATION:** Implement legislative frameworks addressing issues such as excessive workloads, fair task distribution, and streamlined administrative processes.
- **FINANCIAL INCENTIVES:** Address economic and infrastructural factors supporting healthcare workers, including transport arrangements, recreational spaces, and greenery in hospital environments.

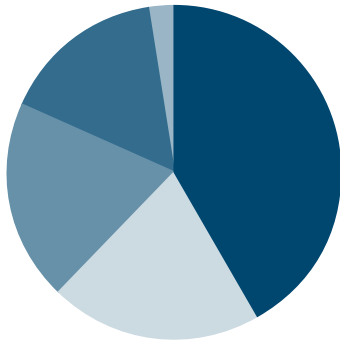


We hope that the data we have gathered and recommendations we have developed over our three years of research will prove useful for policymakers and healthcare managers throughout Europe as they struggle to address the important issue of worker retention. We also recognise that further research in this area is needed, and we hope that our results will provide a solid foundation for others to build on.



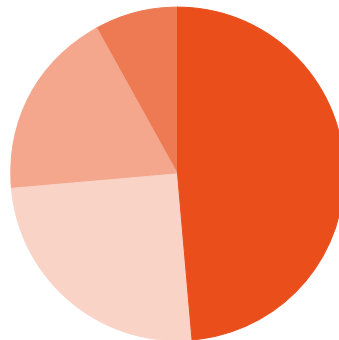
POTENTIAL JOB RETENTION INTERVENTIONS

Professional and Personal Support



- Regular Team Meetings
- Leadership Training Programs
- Self-rostering and Sabbaticals
- Support in Administrative and Non-clinical Work
- Provision of Psychological Counselling

Education



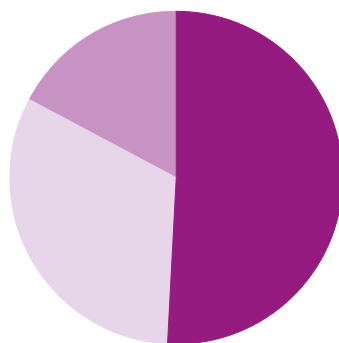
- Development Opportunities
- Periodic Evaluations
- Onboarding and Mentorship
- Peer Support Groups

Financial Incentives



- Competitive Salaries
- Infrastructure
- Extra Benefits
- Transport
- Permanent Contracts

Legislation



- Fixed Healthcare Worker-to-patient Ratio
- Instruments to Monitor Workload
- Complementary Legislation



Project METEOR (Mental health: focus on retention of healthcare workers) aimed to increase scientific knowledge about why workers in European Union health professions change jobs. It identified and analysed the main predictors of job retention in four European countries (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland); developed evidence-based policy recommendations through continuous stakeholder engagement; and presented these results in an easily accessible online toolbox. The project was executed by KU Leuven, the Medical University of Silesia, the University of Palermo, Spaarne Gasthuis, and Aldgate Strategy Group. To find out more visit our website: www.meteorproject.eu

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