



Conference Report

HEALTH WORKFORCE AND CARE STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: OUTCOMES FROM THE TWO-DAY BRUSSELS MEETING AND EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Across Europe, healthcare systems are under mounting pressure as nursing shortages intensify. With an aging workforce and rising patient needs, hospitals are finding it difficult to maintain adequate staffing levels. The strain became even more apparent during the COVID-19 crisis, which highlighted deep vulnerabilities in the system. As nurses face increasing workloads and emotional fatigue, resilience has emerged as a vital skill. This article reports on the two-day meeting held in Brussels, November 3rd, and 4th 2025, which brought together key stakeholders, policymakers, and Members of the European Parliament to discuss the “Health Workforce and Care Strategy for the Future of Europe”. This two-day event included the European Specialist Nurses Organization General Assembly and high-level discussions in the European Parliament focused on strengthening Europe’s health workforce, setting the scene for improving working conditions and developing long-term strategies for sustainable healthcare delivery in Europe. This article will highlight key themes, needs for policy recommendations, and collaborative actions agreed upon to address the evolving challenges of healthcare workforce planning and patient care across the European Union. Developing resilience helps healthcare professionals manage stress, adapt to unpredictable conditions, and continue delivering safe, compassionate care. Institutions play

a crucial role by fostering supportive environments, offering mental health resources, and promoting work-life balance. Strengthening resilience in healthcare systems is therefore not just a personal need but a strategic priority for the future of European healthcare.

Keywords: *specialist nurses, policy, advocating, stakeholders, collaboration.*

INTRODUCTION

Europe is facing a growing nursing shortage due to an aging population and increased healthcare demands. Many countries struggle to attract and retain qualified nurses, leading to heavy workloads and burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of the healthcare workforce. As a result, healthcare professionals face a high level of emotional burnout, which differs in intensity and rate of development from other causes of burnout (1). Staff shortages compromise patient safety, quality of care, and overall system efficiency. Fear of the unknown increases the level of anxiety in individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, but also in healthy individuals. (2) Nurses often face emotional and physical exhaustion from long hours and understaffed units. The mental health of nurses in European

healthcare systems is increasingly concerning. Many nurses experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to staff shortages and heavy workloads. A study among healthcare workers in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a high prevalence of burnout: 61.9 % for emotional exhaustion, 47.6 % for depersonalization, and 34.3 % for reduced personal accomplishment where nurses were 4.5 times more likely to experience burnout compared to assistants, and depersonalization was significantly more common among younger nurses (3). The emotional demands of patient care, combined with limited institutional support, further intensify psychological strain. Post-pandemic pressures have also led to rising cases of depression, burnout, and compassion fatigue among healthcare workers. Key studies have linked nurse burnout to patient safety incidents, medication errors, staffing shortages, and higher patient mortality. Because of the critical role of nurses in delivering and, in some cases, overseeing patient care, nurse burnout may be associated with many dimensions of patient outcomes (4). Another problem is an ageing population worldwide, and on European continent. The ageing population across Europe is increasing the demand for healthcare services, placing growing pressure on nurses who provide both acute and long-term care. This ageing of the EU's population is likely to result in considerable demands for a range of care services, as an increasing proportion of the population becomes frail and suffers from declining physical and mental health (5). As more older adults require complex, chronic, and geriatric care, the workload for nurses intensifies, leading to higher stress levels and risk of burnout. This strain contributes to staff shortages, reduced quality of patient care, longer waiting times, and increased medical errors, ultimately weakening healthcare system efficiency. Without strategic workforce planning and support, the combined effect of an ageing population and overburdened nurses threatens the sustainability and resilience of healthcare systems. The strategies identified to foster nurse resilience will not only impact the nursing staff but also improve patient outcomes (6). Health systems can take various actions to address the ageing of the health workforce. A two-pronged approach that educates, recruits, and retains young practitioners, and reinvests in the mature workforce is needed (7). Addressing nurses' mental well-being through counselling services, supportive leadership, and manageable workloads is essential to sustain a healthy and effective workforce. One way to prevent this from happening is to ensure that all medical staff members receive psychological assistance and to create a working environment that is conducive to good mental and emotional health (8, 9). Building resilience among healthcare workers has become essential to maintain performance under stress. Resilient nurses can adapt better to challenges and recover more quickly from adversity. Addressing workforce shortages while promoting resilience is key to sustaining Europe's healthcare systems. Encouraging teamwork and peer support helps strengthen collective resilience. Hospitals and institutions must invest in mental health support and professional development programs. Resilience in healthcare can be described as the "ability to adapt to challenges and changes at different system levels to maintain high quality care" (10). Strategic planning on approach

to policies in healthcare also must include organizations and hospitals nurses are employed by. Higher rate of turnover also negatively impacts on organizations and hospitals. Flanders et al. (2020) pointed out that increased nurse turnover, caused by nurse burnout, has resulted in high organizational costs due to the need to train other nurses to fill the vacant positions. Nurse turnover, because of workplace stressors, felt and experienced by critical care nurses has negatively influenced the delivery of care to patients (11,12,13,14,15,16).

CONTEXT

The nursing workforce in the European Union is a cornerstone of healthcare delivery, yet it faces persistent challenges that threaten both workforce sustainability and quality of care. Nurses operate under varying professional statuses 'practising' professionals providing direct patient care, 'professionally active' nurses whose medical training is required for their role, and 'licensed' nurses who are registered but may be inactive or work outside direct care—highlighting the complexity of workforce planning. For nurses working in very dynamic wards, it is important to realize how many stressful situations they face, with the lack of workforce not being supportive, long term. Unsupportive working environment, colleagues leaving profession and burnout levels only make these situations seemingly unresolvable. Due to the nature of their work, nurses represent a larger percentage of healthcare workers often confronted by traumatic events, identified as a contributing factor to job turnover (17). Amid staffing shortages, high workloads, and increasing patient demands, nurses are experiencing significant burnout and mental health challenges, which adversely affect patient safety, satisfaction, and overall healthcare quality. Identification of stressors refers to when individuals are allowed to recognize workplace stressors and verbalize these identified stressors to promote early intervention by an organization to address these concerns (18). Addressing these issues requires a systemic transformation toward resilient healthcare systems that prioritize mental well-being, support professional retention, and ensure sustainable, high-quality care across EU health systems.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

European Specialist Nurses Organization (ESNO) General Assembly took place on first day in Brussels. After meeting hybrid participants, meeting was successful and productive. The financial overview presented a positive outcome following the recent congress despite attendance of just over 200 participants, strong support from sponsors and local industry ensured a successful and financially positive event. The association continues to primarily rely on external funding, but ongoing collaboration with EU projects and diversification towards the technological industry help strengthen sustainability. Cash committee alongside treasurer was

formed, to ensure financial transparency and accountability moving forward.

After reporting on INI, the organization recently conducted a new type of members' consultation, which proved highly productive. Four to five members provided detailed feedback on organizational structure and future directions. Overall satisfaction was high, though many members expressed a desire for greater involvement in operational and programmatic work. This highlighted the need for improved integration and coherence across activities. Based on these insights, the organization identified that while all initiatives are relevant, they often function independently. To address this, a long-term business plan is being developed to strengthen connections, create alignment, and support sustainable growth. The plan focuses on establishing a unified value proposition, harmonized communication, and clearer strategic direction.

A new web shop initiative was also introduced to improve access to organizational materials, such as reports, guides, and campaign tools, while generating modest revenue. Members will continue to receive free materials for association promotion, while external partners may purchase them. Finally, the proposed long-term business model aims to move the organization from fragmentation to unity. It emphasizes shared advocacy, education, and partnership efforts, supported by financial sustainability and a clear value proposition. This framework will guide future coordination, engagement, and resource management, ensuring all activities contribute coherently to the organization's mission and impact.

The 8th ESNO Congress will take place in Rome from the 4th to the 6th of June 2026 at Campus University, located in the very heart of the city near the Vatican. While organizing additional regional events may not be feasible, ESNO plans to support national organizations by hosting smaller panel discussions. Strategically, ESNO aims to enhance connections with universities and nursing associations across Europe to foster integration and knowledge exchange.

Recent collaborations, such as the event in North Macedonia supported by ESNO, have proven strategically valuable in strengthening regional engagement. ESNO's efforts will also focus on engaging nurses from underrepresented regions, such as Spain and northern Europe, by providing initial support to encourage participation. This approach aligns with ESNO's goal of expanding its European network and ensuring all countries have the opportunity to contribute and benefit from shared expertise.

Some members, including regulatory authorities such as Albania, bring valuable perspectives to the collective effort. The aim is to promote unity among nursing specialties while maintaining clear distinctions between different entities such as unions, associations, and regulatory bodies—each serving its own mission and purpose. ESNO's focus remains on representing and advancing specialized nursing in Europe. The organization's leadership strongly believes that collaboration among distinct, yet complementary institutions is essential to driving progress

in European nursing, fostering greater unity, and elevating the profession across all countries.

MEETING A KEY MEMBER OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT REGARDING ACTUAL PROBLEMS

The growth of ESNO as an organization stems from the collaboration of various associations across Europe, particularly those representing clinical specialties and national professional groups. This diversity of voices strengthens the organization and reflects the richness of nursing practice across the continent.

ESNO plays a vital role in serving as the collective voice of specialist nurses for key stakeholders and policymakers across Europe. By representing the expertise, needs, and perspectives of the nursing profession, ESNO ensures that health policies are informed by those working closest to patients and clinical realities. Its advocacy helps shape evidence-based strategies, influences legislative processes, and raises awareness of critical workforce, education, and practice issues. Through its strong presence at the European level, ESNO contributes to building resilient healthcare systems and ensures that the professional voice of nurses remains central in policy discussions and decision-making.

The meeting with Member of the European Parliament Dr. András Tivadar Kulja, held on 3 November 2025, brought together representatives from ESNO and several national nursing associations to address the growing workforce challenges facing nurses across Europe. Participants highlighted critical issues such as staffing shortages, increasing workload pressures, and the urgent need for strategies to retain nurses within the profession. Dr. Kulja expressed appreciation for the clear and evidence-based concerns presented, emphasizing that these voices are being heard and recognized as a pressing, Europe-wide problem. The discussion concluded with a shared understanding of the necessity to develop a new, coordinated strategy to strengthen the nursing workforce and ensure the sustainability of healthcare systems throughout the European Union.

ESNO EVENT

This high-level Brussels event addressed the pressing shortage of healthcare professionals, with a focus on nurses, care workers, and doctors, particularly in primary and community health. Bringing together European policymakers, healthcare leaders, and nursing professionals, the event aimed to foster consensus on harmonizing retention strategies to strengthen the workforce. The decline in nurses and doctors has undermined healthcare systems, a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and fragmented initiatives have so far failed to provide lasting solutions. Research indicates that nurses and doctors are more likely to remain in their roles when they feel supported, recognized, and empowered; however, variations in education and certification across Europe contribute to workforce instability. According to RNAO, an empowering

work environment is characterised by providing ‘access to information, support, resources, and opportunities to learn and grow,’ which must occur in a setting that encourages professional autonomy as well as institutional support (19). The event provided a platform to align perspectives and promote action toward a harmonized framework for nursing retention, career development, education, and certification. In addition to keynote speakers, participants—including listeners, questioners, and responders—engaged actively in discussions. Key themes included mental health support, gender equity, and sustainable career pathways, reflecting evidence that when healthcare professionals are supported, workforce stability and patient care quality improve.

Programme included key topics that tackle burning problems in European health workforce, presented summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Program of a Strategic dialogue on nursing leadership, retention, and sustainable health systems

Lecture title	Organization presented by speaker
Capacity building with emphasis on strengthening positions and responsibilities	World Health Organization
Commission's support Member States addressing their health systems and workforce challenges	European Commission DG Sante
Increasing retention rates is key to address health workforce shortages	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
Embedding Mental Health and Gender Equity as prerequisite for a sustainable health workforce	European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
The nurse action plan is to be implemented national, cross nation and disciplines: activities at WHO level	World Health Organisation - Europe
How does Retention connect to science & career perspectives	Sigma Theta Tau Europe
The ongoing development of the nursing profession, in contrast to paralysis of health systems	Lead Advanced Nurse Practitioners

Europe’s nursing workforce crisis represents a structural threat to healthcare quality, equity, and sustainability. High levels of burnout, mental distress, and physical risk undermine nurse well-being and patient outcomes alike. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift toward resilient healthcare systems that protect nurses, support professional development, and enable sustainable careers.

Table 2. Breakout sessions summary

Breakout #1- Retention and economics

From a financial and legal perspective, the debate positioned nurse retention as an economic investment rather than a workforce cost. Thomas London outlined the importance of measurable KPIs to demonstrate system impact, highlighting indicators such as reduced waiting lists and vacancy rates, lower reliance on temporary staffing, improved organisational efficiency linked to workforce satisfaction, and stronger continuity of care for chronic patients. Four strategic levers were identified to advance retention. First, compensation models should evolve through variable approaches and better financial support for students and educators. Second, working conditions require reinforced legal protections—particularly around rest time—supported by access to workforce data. Third, national frameworks for continuous professional development should include protected training time within working hours. Finally, organisational reform—through strengthened delegation, outcome-based funding, investment in nursing leadership, and “Magnet-like” workplace programmes—was recognised as essential to building sustainable retention and system performance.

Breakout #2 – Mentorship

From the perspective of professional culture and workforce sustainability, the debate underscored mentorship as a high-impact driver of nurse retention. Structural mentorship programmes—when formally embedded within organisational frameworks, were shown to strengthen early-career transition, reduce attrition, and enhance long-term professional engagement. During the breakout discussions, multiple practice examples were shared from national and institutional levels, supported by emerging evidence demonstrating improvements in job satisfaction, clinical confidence, and team cohesion. Participants emphasised that effective mentorship extends beyond informal peer support; it requires trained mentors, protected time, and alignment with career development pathways. A collective call emerged to foster a renewed culture in which mentorship is recognised as a core workforce strategy, positioned alongside financial investment, and supported through dedicated funding, governance structures, and leadership endorsement to ensure scalability and sustainability

Breakout #3 – Workforce policy and politics

The breakout on health workforce policy and politics resulted in a shared recognition of the strategic importance of structured engagement by health professionals in European decision-making processes. Discussions underscored that workforce sustainability, mobility, education, and scope of practice are increasingly shaped at EU level, requiring proactive nursing representation within formal institutions and policy forums. Participants stressed the value of contributing to open consultations, expert panels, and advisory platforms where legislative and programme frameworks are formed. Examples were shared of professional organisations successfully influencing agendas through coordinated advocacy and evidence submission. A clear call emerged to strengthen alignment with European agencies and health workforce bodies to access policy intelligence, technical guidance, and strategic support—ensuring that nursing perspectives are embedded in future workforce policies, funding instruments, and regulatory developments across the European health ecosystem.

The Brussels meeting and strategic dialogue demonstrated broad consensus: nurses are indispensable to Europe's health systems, and their voices must remain central in policy development. Coordinated European action is urgently needed to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

CALL FOR ACTION:

The Brussels dialogue identified four interconnected strategic priorities:

1. Psychological Safety and Mental Health Support

Establishing psychologically safe workplaces with access to confidential counselling, burnout prevention programs, structured debriefing, and resilience training.

2. Physical Safety and Workplace Protections

Strengthening occupational health standards, violence prevention, ergonomic protection, and safer facility design to reduce long-term health risks.

3. Digital Transformation and Innovation

Accelerating the adoption of digital tools that reduce administrative burden, enhance patient safety, improve workflow efficiency, and support staff well-being.

4. Harmonisation of Competencies and Professional Mobility

Aligning education, competencies, and certification standards to facilitate cross-border mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications, and consistent care quality across the EU27.

Call to European Institutions and Member States

The participants of this Strategic Dialogue urge the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and all Member States to take immediate and coordinated action to:

- **Establish minimum European standards for psychological safety and mental health support** in all healthcare institutions, ensuring access to confidential counselling, structured debriefing, resilience training, and protection for professionals who raise safety concerns.
- **Strengthen physical safety and workplace protections** through improved facility design, safer medical devices, robust occupational health measures, and prevention of violence and ergonomic injuries.
- **Prioritize technology integration that enhances psychological safety and efficiency**, including digital workflow systems, medication traceability tools, wearable safety devices, and environmental design innovations that reduce cognitive overload and fatigue.
- **Harmonize nursing competencies, education, and certification across the EU27**, enabling professional mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications, and consistent high-quality care, particularly in times of workforce shortage or crisis.

This event calls for united European leadership to ensure that nurses—who form the backbone of Europe's healthcare systems—are empowered, protected, and equipped to meet present and future challenges.

CONCLUSION

The nursing workforce within the European Union is characterized by diverse professional statuses, reflecting differences in training, employment, and regulatory recognition. Among nurses, three key categories are typically distinguished. 'Practising' nurses are those health care professionals who provide services directly to patients, representing the frontline workforce delivering care daily. 'Professionally active' nurses include practising professionals as well as health care workers whose medical education is a prerequisite for their current job, even if they are not directly engaged in patient care. Finally, 'licensed' nurses encompass all registered health care professionals entitled to practise, including those whose nursing education is not directly required for their role, as well as individuals who are economically inactive, such as retirees or those currently unemployed. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for workforce planning, policy development, and addressing issues such as staffing shortages, skill-mix, and the allocation of resources across EU health systems. Nurses across healthcare systems face high levels of burnout and mental health challenges, driven by long hours, staffing shortages, and the emotional demands of patient care. These pressures not only affect nurses' well-being but also compromise patient safety, satisfaction, and quality of care. Addressing these issues requires a fundamental transformation toward resilient healthcare systems that prioritize mental health support, manageable workloads, and organizational strategies fostering professional fulfilment and retention.

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