The state of healthcare workers' mental health and wellbeing across Europe: facts, challenges and opportunities

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46%
of EU citizens had an emotional or psychosocial problem in the last 12 months

89%
of EU citizens agree that mental health promotion is as important as physical health promotion

25%
of EU citizens report that they or a family member encountered issues accessing mental health services[2]

Did you know that mental health is an integral part of overall health? It's more than just feeling good – it's about realising your abilities, coping with life's stresses, and contributing to your community. Mental health isn't just about individuals or families; it's a **key factor for a productive economy and inclusive society.** It's influenced by personal and external factors, reflecting the state of our society, economy, environment, and global affairs. Better mental health is not only a social imperative but also an economic one. Considering that people spend a significant amount of time at work, a supportive work environment is crucial for mental well-being. Stress and psychosocial risks at work can impact mental health, leading to issues like decreased job satisfaction, conflicts, and lower productivity. Unfortunately, **around half of European workers experience stress in their workplace, contributing to half of all lost working days.** Addressing psychosocial risks and work-related stress is essential for ensuring the wellbeing; of health workers and promoting a safe and healthy work environment.

The Challenge Dimension and Facts:

- A study[1] concluded that burnout, mental health morbidities, job dissatisfaction, and concerns about patient safety and care quality are prevalent among European hospital physicians and nurses. For clinicians, interventions to improve hospital work environments and staffing are more important than mental health interventions to improve personal resilience.

- According to the EU-OSHA, 79% of European managers are concerned about stress in their workplaces but less than 30% of workplaces in Europe have procedures for dealing with it. Concerns about psychosocial risks such as stress, violence, and harassment are increasing in European organisations; likewise, health workers are equally impacted by these issues.

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, **1 in 6 people in the EU suffered from mental health issues.** This situation has worsened with the unprecedented crises experienced over the past years[2]. The pandemic has placed additional pressure on people's mental health, especially among the young and those with pre-existing mental health conditions. When it comes to the health workforce, COVID-19 has not only brought healthcare workers' mental health and wellbeing; challenges to the forefront but also exacerbated these problems. According to WHO Europe, **over 80% of nurses reported some form of psychological distress** caused by the pandemic, in some European countries.[3]

- A recent study conducted to assess the wellbeing; of physicians and nurses practising in hospitals across Europe revealed concerning trends[4]. Among physicians, **57% reported experiencing poor work-life balance,** while **40% of nurses** faced similar challenges. Additionally, a significant proportion expressed intent to **leave their positions,** with **29% of physicians and 33% of nurses** considering this option. Moreover, high levels of burnout were prevalent, affecting 25% of physicians and 26% of nurses. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions aimed at reducing adverse clinician outcomes and improving patient safety within hospital settings.

Policy Discourse:

- Policy implementation falls short in effectively addressing the current challenges; while there is stronger international attention to healthcare workers' needs, it is less pronounced at the national or regional levels.

- Adopting a health system approach is important but not sufficient. **Successful mental health policy implementation needs multi-level governance and coherent coordination mechanisms[7].**

Current EU Actions to Tackle Mental Health Across Policies

EUROPEAN CODE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

HEALTHIER TOGETHER INITIATIVE FOR NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

EUROPEAN DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE PREVENTION INITIATIVE

SAFER DIGITAL SPACES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

PROPER APPLICATION OF EU RULES ON SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK

EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK (EU-OSHA) WORKPLACES CAMPAIGNS

EU Flagship Initiatives[8]:

- European Mental Health Capacity Building Initiative
- European Depression and Suicide Prevention Initiative
- Access Gate for People Experiencing Mental Health Issues
- European Code for Mental Health
- Developing a Joint Ecosystem for Brain Research
- Healthy Screens, Healthy Youth
- Child and Youth Mental Health Network

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Did you know that the **mental health** of healthcare workers, particularly nurses, can be significantly impacted by their work environment? There is a troubling correlation between the stress and trauma experienced in healthcare settings and the mental wellbeing; of healthcare professionals. Additionally, violence against healthcare workers, including verbal abuse, physical assaults, and threats, further exacerbates these challenges. The toll of such incidents on the mental health of health professionals cannot be overstated, leading to increased levels of **anxiety, depression, and burnout.** We must recognise and address these issues to ensure the **wellbeing;** of our dedicated healthcare professionals.

We ought to acknowledge:

- Violence against healthcare workers is **not merely an individual issue; it represents a public health crisis** with far-reaching consequences. The incidence of violence, particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, profoundly impacts the physical and mental well-being of healthcare professionals.

- Addressing this crisis demands comprehensive **policy solutions.** These solutions must encompass **prevention measures, robust support systems, enhanced education and training,** and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including law enforcement and civil society.

- To effectively combat violence against healthcare workers, it's imperative **to prioritise data collection and monitoring.** Implementing systematic mechanisms for data collection and conducting **longitudinal studies** are essential to grasp the prevalence and patterns of violence over time.

- Furthermore, it's crucial to acknowledge and address the **gender-based, racialised, and sexualised dimensions of violence.** These dimensions disproportionately affect women, minority groups, and migrant healthcare workers. Tailored policies targeting these vulnerable populations are imperative.

- Professional associations and international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), play a pivotal role in combating violence against healthcare workers. Initiatives like the WHO's 'Global Health and Care Workers Compact[6]' are vital steps toward safeguarding healthcare professionals and fostering supportive work environments conducive to mental health.

Where does Health Management come in?

These points highlight the multifaceted approach required **from health management to safeguard the wellbeing; of healthcare workers** and mitigate the risks associated with violence in healthcare settings:

- **Training and Upskilling:** Health professionals should be provided with **certified training in interdisciplinary management skills** and foster coping and wellbeing skills. **Training in mental health** could increase the mental health literacy of the health workforce. The priority areas where digital transformation could be applied: strengthening primary care; strengthening the health workforce's **digital skills**; digital **mental health** services for the public and the health workforce; and **improving data governance.** As for health managers, skill development is crucial, to ensure they are equipped with the necessary tools, knowledge, and abilities to effectively implement prevention strategies and offer support to healthcare workers.

- **Immediate Response:** Employers have a responsibility to respond promptly to challenges as they arise, ensuring the safety of healthcare workers in real time.

- **Security Measures:** Considering additional security measures within healthcare facilities to prevent instances of violence, such as deploying security officers or implementing workplace violence prevention interventions.

- **Encouraging Reporting:** Creating a culture where healthcare workers feel encouraged to report incidents of violence, supported by systems that capture this information accurately for better understanding and documentation.

- **Broad Scope of Health Management:** Recognising that health management encompasses various roles beyond traditional healthcare positions, including policymakers and finance professionals, all of whom play a role in addressing these issues. Effective solutions require **strong political leadership and policy enforcement.** This entails not only enforcing existing laws but also implementing better protection measures and sustaining efforts to create safe working environments.

- **Prevention Strategies:** Exploring comprehensive prevention strategies across governance, operations, personnel management, and financial management to proactively address and mitigate risks of violence against healthcare workers.

- **Connect key actors at various system levels:** by facilitating communication and collaboration between frontline healthcare workers, middle management, and senior leadership within healthcare organisations and engaging with local community leaders, government officials, civil society and policymakers to ensure alignment of healthcare initiatives with broader public health goals.

1. Physician and nurse well-being, patient safety and recommendations for interventions: cross-sectional survey in hospitals in six European countries | BMJ Open

2. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union/comprehensive-approach-mental-health_en

3. Ticking timebomb: Without immediate action, health and care workforce gaps in the European Region could spell disaster (who.int)

4. Physician and nurse well-being, patient safety and recommendations for interventions: cross-sectional survey in hospitals in six European countries | BMJ Open

5. https://ehma.org/webinars/stepping-up-the-prevention-of-violence-against-healthcare-workers/

6. who.int/publications/i/item/9789240073852

7. The mental health needs of healthcare workers: When evidence does not guide policy. A comparative assessment of selected European countries (wiley.com)

8. https://health.ec.europa.eu/document/download/cef45b6d-a871-44d5-9d62-3cecc47eda89_en?filename=com_2023_298_1_act_en.pdf