



EFN Policy Statement on Safe Staffing Levels

This Policy Statement draws from EFN previous policy statements and from data gathered by EFN members in relation to registered nursing ratios and registered nursing accountability.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the critical shortage of nurses and other healthcare professionals and is now severely impeding the functioning of healthcare systems in the EU, Europe and around the world.

Health budget cuts and cost saving measures introduced during the 2009 financial crisis continue to significantly impact the nursing profession with reduced staffing levels, cuts to wages and challenging working environments. Meanwhile, since this time the demand for healthcare has risen.

The EFN has long highlighted the need for EU Institutions and Member States to adequately address the growing registered nursing shortages. The World Health Organization (2022) characterises current gaps in the health and care workforce in Europe as a ‘ticking time bomb’ that could lead to worsening health outcomes and, in extreme cases, system collapse.

The EFN has continually campaigned on the issue of nursing workforce shortages. Specifically, the EFN’s two position statements, ‘Building and Sustaining a Resilient EU Nursing Workforce in the EU and Europe’ (April 2022) and ‘Consequences of Nurses Shortages in Public Health’ (November 2020) address the negative impacts of nursing shortages on the profession and broader healthcare system. However, the political response and rhetoric by EU Institutions and Member States to tackle the challenges have not translated into any tangible action to develop and implement solutions to protect the status of the nursing profession, improve retention and reimbursement of registered nurses within the healthcare systems.

Registered nurses have long been recognised as the backbone of the healthcare ecosystems and were the heroes in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, European countries have not responded by providing the appropriate protections to the profession. In reality, the challenges to the profession: workforce shortages, resilience, migration, and unethical recruitment and retention, have never been tackled in a meaningful and sustained way. The outcome of this situation has been increasing the levels of stress, burnout and physical exhaustion in nursing.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence confirmed that high workloads, inadequate staffing levels, long shifts and low control over their job were associated with burnout in nurses and impacted their mental health. The lack of educational support in promoting nursing and attracting/retaining new students has been equally challenging. The end result has been a critically low workforce which severely impacts patient safety, quality of care and the welfare of nurses.

While interventions targeting fair pay, safety at work, gender/race discrimination or better career progression are important, multidimensional systemic changes are required to bring about sustained and lasting change.

Studies show that some units are operating with registered nurse staffing numbers which are considered unsafe, therefore, jeopardising the quality of care and safety of the people under their care, as well as their own safety (Aiken L., 2014, 2021). We are witnessing a concerning increase in the use of unregulated labour in the healthcare sector, leading to unsafe skill mix even when it comes to nursing roles close to the patients, with negative implications for the quality of care and patient safety. Moreover, under these conditions and increased workload, nurses are held accountable for missed nursing care incidents or the inability to maintain optimal quality standards required by patients and healthcare systems (Phelan A and McCarthy S, 2016). Nursing students have reported excessive practice hours, a lack of educators and mentors, and requirements to undertake tasks beyond their scope of clinical practice during placements leading to students leaving their studies or deciding not to seek employment within the nursing profession after completing their studies.

Amid these growing concerns of dire working conditions and a shortage of registered nurses, it is crucial to have safe staffing levels in the nursing profession across the EU and Europe and find concrete solutions for recruiting and retaining European nurses, vital for providing quality and safe patient care.

The evidence shows that increased registered nurse staffing with an appropriate skill mix positively affects patient outcomes and mortality rates, and improves job satisfaction and nurse retention (Griffiths et al., 2018; Aiken et al., 2014, Ball and Catton, 2011; Aiken et al., 2002). Evidence-based methods to determine the most appropriate staffing levels and skill mix are also important tools for ensuring safe staffing—for example, the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix (Department of Health Ireland, 2018).

Therefore, ensuring optimal nurse staffing is essential to providing safe, high-quality care.

Therefore, the EFN calls on the EU and non EU decision-makers within Europe to immediately:

1. Establish and legislate safe registered nurse staffing levels, with an appropriate skill mix to ensure the safety of patients and nurses, with enforcement mechanisms and penalties. Always maintain safe nurse staffing levels in all clinical areas to ensure they can respond safely to all patient needs and the ability to deal with different situations that healthcare systems might encounter to protect nursing personnel.

2. Establish proper and legitimate agreements that will protect nurses when faced with missed nursing care due to registered nurse shortages. Invest in nursing leadership and career pathways to reduce nurses leaving the profession.
3. Invest in nurses and nursing education, and increase all efforts to make nursing education attractive to students and increase enrolment in undergraduate studies. Increase funding for undergraduate student nurses, increase placements and support students through clinical facilitation. The challenges in nursing education must be addressed to increase the number of nursing students completing their studies and attracting more people into the profession, thus minimising nursing shortages.

Finally, having a sufficient supply of well-educated registered nurses will support the EU's efforts to act on all health determinants (social, economic and ecological) through health promotion and disease prevention, and meet their obligations to provide expert, timely healthcare to its citizens and populations.

Further readings:

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- EFN Policy Statement on European Global Health Strategy (2023)
<https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-European-Global-Health-Strategy-April-2023.pdf>
- EFN Policy Statement on Building and Sustaining a Resilient EU Nursing Workforce in the EU and Europe (2022)
<https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-Building-and-Sustaining-a-Resilient-EU-Nursing-Workforce-in-the-EU-and-Europe-April-2022.pdf>

- EFN Position Statement on Consequences of nurses shortages in public health (2020) <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-Consequences-Nurses-Shortages-in-Public-Health-Nov.2020.pdf>
- EFN Position Statement on Quality & Safety Standards (2009) <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/EFN-Position-Statement-on-EU-Quality-and-Safety-Standards-EN-final102009.pdf>
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- Department of Health (Ireland) (2018) Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill-Mix in General and Specialist Medical and Surgical Care Settings in Ireland 2018. <https://assets.gov.ie/10011/e1a93e955329405694bb7b16aea50b98.pdf>
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- Phelan A and McCarthy S (2016) Missed Care: Community Nursing in Ireland. University College Dublin and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, Dublin <https://www.inmo.ie/tempDocs/MissedCareReportweb.pdf>
- WHO, 2022. Ticking timebomb: Without immediate action, health and care workforce gaps in the European Region could spell disaster. Available from: <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/14-09-2022-ticking-timebomb--without-immediate-action--health-and-care-workforce-gaps-in-the-european-region-could-spell-disaster> [Accessed 07/03/23]
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