



EFN Policy Statement on the Nurses' Health and Safety at Work

Nurses in Europe face an escalating occupational health and safety crisis. Evidence from [WHO Europe \(MeND survey, 2025\)](#) and [EU-OSHA](#) shows high levels of work-related mental ill-health, musculoskeletal strain, exposure to hazardous medicinal products, workplace violence, and risks linked to chronic understaffing. According to the [European Institute of Women's Health \(2024\)](#), 78% of the healthcare workforce across Europe are women, underscoring the need for a gender lens when designing and implementing occupational health and safety programmes, particularly as research on women's occupational health remains limited. Moreover, as more than a quarter of the EU nursing workforce is aged over-55 ([OECD Health at a Glance: Europe 2024](#)), adequate occupational health and safety programmes plans are urgently needed to prevent and address the impact of cumulative Musculoskeletal strain and stress. According to the World Health Organisation's health worker safety charter ([WHO, 2020](#)), healthcare professionals' and patient safety are intrinsically linked domains of practice (WHO, 2020). Therefore, this is not only a workforce issue; it is a patient safety issue and a threat to the resilience of health systems.

Safe staffing levels are the foundation of a safe working environment for nurses. Without sufficient staffing, measures on mental health, violence prevention, musculoskeletal protection and safe handling of hazardous medicinal products cannot be fully effective. Protecting nurses' health and safety is essential not only for retaining the workforce, but also for ensuring quality of care, patient safety and the continuity of health services. Safe staffing levels are crucial to addressing many of the primary psychosocial and health risk factors impacting the European nursing workforce identified by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work such as severe time pressure, overload of work, fatigue, and burnout (EU-OSHA Pulse 2025). Given the severity of this crisis, [especially post-COVID-19](#) and in the current insecure geopolitical context, and in preparation for the 2028–2032 EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work, the EFN is therefore calling on the European Institutions and the Member States to:

- Recognise Safe Staffing Levels as a core occupational health and safety measure to secure a safe working environment and protect nurses from psychosocial and musculoskeletal disorders.

- Develop EU framework legislation on Safe Staffing Levels with national implementation and enforcement supported by EU funding; Monitor the implementation of Safe Staffing Levels through the European Semester.
- Adequately Implement the European Parliament EMPL–SANT INI Report on ‘An EU health workforce crisis plan: sustainability of healthcare systems and employment and working conditions in the healthcare sector’, and the EMPL INL Report on ‘Psychosocial risks, stress and mental health at work’ recommendations, including the proposal for an EU Directive on the prevention of work–related psychosocial risks, stress and mental health at work.
- Ensure the development of robust occupational health and safety programmes that adequately incorporate a gender–sensitive and intersectional perspective across all measures, including risk assessment, mitigation and response systems, and that support research on women’s occupational health, to ensure a high standard of protection for nurses across all settings.
- Adopt a zero–tolerance approach to violence and verbal abuse against nurses, including attacks in conflict–affected and insecure settings, by ensuring that national collective agreements include clear, enforceable safety protocols. These should define the rights and responsibilities of all parties, establish safe zones and withdrawal procedures, ensure access to psychological support or supervision, clarify consequences for perpetrators, including patients or relatives, and safeguard both healthcare professionals’ right to a safe working environment and continuity of care through well–defined escalation and support mechanisms.
- Adequately implement and enforce the existing [EU Health and Safety at Work legislation](#), including, among others the [Exposure to carcinogens or mutagens at work \(Directive 2004/37/EC\)](#); the [Prevention from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector \(Directive 2010/32/EU\)](#); the [Manual handling of loads \(back injury\) \(Directive 90/269/EEC\)](#); the [EU Pregnant Workers Directive](#) (Directive 92/85/EEC); and [the EU Working Time Directive \(Directive 2003/88/EC\)](#). To achieve this, it is key to have well–resourced workplace regulators and inspectors. At the same time, ensure that these legislations stay continuously up to date and fit–for–purpose via direct consultation and co–creation with EFN, the EFN Members, as well as with nursing unions’ health and safety representatives in the workplace.

***Note: EFN is using the ICN definition of a nurse:**

A nurse is a professional who is educated in the scientific knowledge, skills and philosophy of nursing, and regulated to practice nursing based on established standards of practice and ethical codes. Nurses enhance health literacy, promote health, prevent illness, protect patient safety, alleviate suffering, facilitate recovery and adaptation, and uphold dignity throughout life and at end of life. They work autonomously and collaboratively across settings to improve health, through advocacy, evidence-informed decision-making, and culturally safe, therapeutic relationships. Nurses provide people-centred, compassionate clinical and social care, manage services, enhance health systems, advance public and population health, and foster safe and sustainable environments. Nurses lead, educate, research, advocate, innovate and shape policy to improve health outcomes.

Further, nurses play a unique role in health and care for populations of all ages, and in all settings, building trust with individuals, families and communities and gaining valuable insights into people's experiences of health and illness. Building on a foundation of personalized direct and social care, nurses advance their capabilities through ongoing education, research and exploration of best practices.

A nurse's scope of practice is defined by their level of education, experience, competency, professional standards and lawful authority. They play a key role in the coordination, supervision of, and delegation to others who may assist in the provision of health care.

Often at the front line, they respond to disasters, conflicts and emergencies, demonstrating courage, dedication, adaptability and commitment to the health of individuals, communities and the environment.

(ICN, [2025](#))

Further Readings:

- EU-OSHA Pulse 2025: Occupational safety and health in the era of climate and digital change: https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/OSH-pulse-2025-climate-digital-change_EN.pdf
- EU-OSHA (2025): Safeguarding musculoskeletal health in the health and social care sector – a policy brief: https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/musculoskeletal-health-health-social-care-sector_w1043_EN.pdf

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