

EPSU Statement on International Nurses Day



Protect the health professionals and improve working conditions before it is too late

On 12 May, we celebrate International Nurses Day. This year the COVID-19 pandemic looks a bit further away, but not the ever the crucial role of nurses in the health and social care sector and in our societies. On the contrary, as the number of deaths decreases so does the attention paid by the media and politicians about the role of those who risked their lives during the pandemic.

In the past weeks, we have seen thousands of nurses in Finland striking, taking action in Italy and in addition nurses in Croatia and Latvia are threatening collective action and a petition to the government by Austrian nurses. Further, thousands of nurses are seeing their contracts not renewed in Spain and Greece, many of whom had joined the workplace at the peak of the pandemic. Yet retention remains a major issue in the health and social care sector, without the nurses and other healthcare professionals we would not have been able to tackle three waves of the pandemic. And yet this seems to have been all too quickly forgotten.

We call again for the policy makers to recognise the crucial work of nurses and ensure better pay and working conditions, including occupational health and safety. The complexity of the work of health and social services professionals requires more balance and equality in pay structures

One of the concerns expressed by citizens at the Conference for the Future of Europe regarding health has been investing in the health systems. This, as the pandemic has shown, requires adequate staffing and good working conditions for nurses. It is now the time to move from the applause to concrete actions.

This must include ensuring workplace health and safety and managing psychosocial risk factors and work-related stress. Intensification of work during the pandemic, caused by inadequate staffing levels and ongoing underinvestment, increased the stress on nurses and affected their mental well-being, resulting in sick leave and burnout for many.

This year International Nurses Day is also marked by the need for a re-evaluation of the profession, particularly in the private sector. The [scandal of Orpea](#) has shown how some private providers undermine the quality of care and professional standards by not respecting the necessary night shifts of nurses to save money and putting in danger patients. This anecdotal example is just one of many that nurses across Europe face.

To this end, EPSU is calling the EU to:

- Ensure that the newly established COVID committee takes stock of the role of nurses during the pandemic and includes nurses and their organisations in the discussions about the lessons to be drawn for the next pandemic;

- Support social partners in establishing the sectoral social dialogue in the social care sector;
- Develop a dedicated Directive on Psychosocial Risks to protect workers from stress and burnout caused by work;
- Increase the investment of the EU4Health budget into improving the working conditions of nurses, in relation to *reinforcing the healthcare workforce*.
The Commission should encourage Member States to apply for funding for these purposes.

EPSU calls on national governments and employers:

- To address staff shortages, which have intensified workloads and resulted in high levels of stress. There is a need to introduce measures to achieve needs-based staffing levels.
- To invest more in mental health public services and ensure all nurses have full and free access to them.
- Support collective bargaining and trade unions rights.

On the global level we call the governments to support the work of the WHO to establish the Pandemic Treaty with measures to address workforce shortages enabling adequate needs-based staffing levels;

Finally, one year later and we are still calling for a TRIPS waiver on the COVID-19 vaccine. We continue to face new variants and several countries are below the 30% vaccination rate. It is unacceptable that nurses might again be facing a risk that is unnecessary. We call on the upcoming WTO ministerial meeting to once and for all make vaccines freely available.

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