

“EU Workforce for Health: Challenges and Perspectives”

By Grete Christensen

EFN President

23 March 2009

CYPRUS

*

**Dear Honourable Guests,
Dear Colleagues,**

The EFN is delighted to be given the opportunity to speak on the topic “EU Workforce for Health”, which is of high priority for EFN members.

The European Federation of Nurses Associations (EFN) was established in 1971 and is the independent voice of the nursing profession in the EU.

The EFN consists of National Nurses Associations from 32 EU Member States, and its work has an effect on the daily work of 6 million nurses throughout the European Union and Europe.

Therefore I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Cyprus Nurses and Midwifery Association for its continuous leadership in EFN and their contribution in achieving the mission of EFN, which is

- To strengthen the status and practice of the profession of nursing for the benefit of the health of the citizens and the interests of nurses in the EU & Europe.**

But we all know, that even when leadership development is effective, leaders may be prevented to produce successful policy outcomes by the structures and the culture of the different institutions they have to operate in.

Therefore, the key element in making EU policies on Workforce and Skill Mix effective throughout the European Union, consisting of 27 Member States, is the stakeholder approach.

This holds also for our own community: EFN governance body meets twice a year to set the EU policy agenda, supported by two executive committees and strong lobby influence from headquarters in Brussels.

Nevertheless, if we really want improved implementation of legislation, recommendations and guidelines, we all need to make sure policies reflect the concerns of the nurses where they live out their lives.

The EFN believes that 30 years after the Declaration of Alma-Ata, it is obvious that a hospital based, curative and traditional management approaches to health care services can not meet the health needs of the European population.

The shift from a disease to determinants approach, from a hospital based service to a community based approach is way too slow due to the lack of appropriate policies.

If progress is to be made, it is crucial that health professionals, in specific nurses, lead and coordinate care. The EU Member States should therefore reward and support innovative efforts to ensure safe and high quality care.

A saying goes, that *change will come by itself – while one have to fight for development*. This holds true here, because delivering quality services to our communities will not happen by chance. It will happen only by choice, determined lobby actions and leadership for strategic workforce planning and effective EU policy-making.

The Green Paper on EU Workforce for Health is such an initiative. The Paper aims to increase the visibility of the issues facing the EU health workforce, to generate a clearer picture of the problems health managers face, and to provide a better basis for considering what could be done at EU level to address these problems effectively.

This Green Paper comes timely, since we are all facing similar problems, which calls for joining our strengths, instead of focussing on our individual weaknesses.

Let me give you some examples of our gravest challenges.

In all the European countries inequality between men and women is a serious problem. Recent studies show, that the pay gap between men and women is 15.9% on average in the EU. The Gender Pay Gap in the EU27 countries was 17.7% in 2006, and fell to 17,4% in 2007. At the same time, the trend was unfortunately the opposite in both Denmark and here in Cyprus as you can see from this graph.

As nurses we all face the fact that inequality in pay hit the nursing profession hard, as most nurses are women. Both Denmark and our Nordic neighbours have been through a year of conflicts, strikes and protest against this inequality. We have gained a lot, but it is critically important to continue to address the gender issue for years to come.

In addition, the workforce is aging and EFN members data indicate that in the coming 15 years the nursing workforce will decline on average with 15%.

Data also show that the entrance, the attractiveness to the nursing profession, is problematic as a long tradition of low pay and shift work makes working in the health sector unattractive. Attracting students and workers to study and work in the health and social

sector will be a major policy challenge. Therefore an EU initiative is timely.

At the same time, most of the European countries are facing the biggest demographic challenge in modern time. This will influence the health care sector a great deal.

The huge post war generation (highlighted by the red circle) will seize our health care resources for many years to come, while new health care personnel must be found in the much smaller generation (highlighted by the green circle).

Furthermore, as free movement of persons is one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the European Treaty, we need to make sure that EU standards in care, standards in education and standards in health outcomes are met at EU level, to comply with the global challenges.

Current European trends in health system reform, with their overarching concern for cost-containment, have had a downside for nursing in many European countries.

This is reflected in cuts in nursing budgets, the loss of a nursing voice in governmental decision-making processes, increases in nursing workloads, and serious concerns about patient safety and the quality of care.

A shortage of nurses' world wide has led to substitution of nurses with minimally trained unlicensed assistants providing direct patient care and some Western European Member States would like to see the nursing education shortened.

These trends need to be countered by effective and efficient EU added value policies.

Therefore, EFN believes that being innovative in skill mix and extending roles and responsibilities is one element of the equation, next to working in multi-disciplinary teams, wider health teams and learning from each other.

Some European countries have taken a step in the right direction, and have introduced Advanced Nurse Practitioners and Nurse Prescribing. We believe this development correlates well with the changes we are facing.

Still, legislation and regulatory arrangements in most European countries are not adapted to recognise the new forms of healthcare and the position and responsibilities of the health care professions must be clearly and transparently defined.

In an EU context, taking into account the right to move freely, we need to consider how to achieve EU-wide self-sufficiency, without having a negative impact on EU and non-EU countries that are facing a critical shortage of health workers.

The Green Paper is a strong piece of EU policy to which EFN has contributed extensively in a pro-active way. Knowing that 75% of the national legislation is set at EU level, EFN input to the EU policy-making process is crucial. Therefore, the two key issues for EFN addressed are:

- § Putting in place an EU mechanism to strategically plan the workforce, regulate better the mutual recognition of professional qualifications and ensuring the availability and comparability of data on the health workforce, in particular with a view to determining the precise movements of nurses;
- § Developing a sustainable health workforce by recruiting and retaining nurses in nursing, by promoting gender equality in

human resource strategies, focussing on workplace health and working conditions and encouraging more nurse entrepreneurs when reforming the healthcare system.

Managing mobility of nurses within the EU therefore needs to go beyond the code of conduct for ethical recruitment.

Last but not least, especially now we are all facing the global financial crisis, we need to get on the train of the EU Social Cohesion Funds for promoting education and training, skilling-up and improving the working conditions of nurses next to safeguarding patient safety and quality standards.

To sum up on the challenges and perspectives...

We are facing similar challenges:

- Scarcity in resources,
- An aging workforce,
- Gender issues, such as inequalities in pay, and
- A demographic revolution.

At the EU level we should:

- Create a mechanism to strategically plan the workforce,
- Get a better mutual recognition of professional qualifications,
- Ensure the availability and comparability of data on the health workforce,
- Develop a sustainable health workforce, and
- Promote gender equality.

Last but not least we also need to build a strong voice within the Nursing Community and create solid synergies between international key health stakeholders – such as the World Health Organization, the ICN and the Chief Nurse Officers.

Exploring these partnerships requires a new way of leadership in which the EU can be a major facilitator. I see the EU Green Paper as a step in the right direction.

Now, it's time to take action, put our best foot forward and change things for the better.

Thank you very much for your attention.