



"AT WHAT COST? THE ECONOMIC CRISIS, POPULATION AND HEALTH" – THE NURSES' VIEW

The recent economic crisis has led to austerity measures in many European countries that have had a severe impact on healthcare systems, and nurses in particular. The negative effects have been observed for years but concrete solutions at EU level are few and far between. For nurses, the financial crisis has led to cuts after cuts and the result is a daily reality marked by uncertainty, increasing work burdens, and low income. When painting a picture of the current day-to-day realities of nurses across Europe, the gravity of the situation is clear (as illustrated in the EFN's report "Caring in Crisis"):

- In Ireland, around **2800 posts were cut** in 2011
- In Moldova, a nurses **salary is 100 euros**
- In Bulgaria, around **1200 nurses leave the country** every year looking for **better working conditions**
- In some Hungarian hospitals, **one nurse** has to provide care **for around 50 patients** during **one shift**
- Many countries report **no maternity substitution OR retirement replacement**
- Cost-cutting has led to a **shortage of hospital beds**
- There is an estimated **shortage of 85000 nurses** in Greece
- **The unemployment rate of newly graduate nurses increases**

The list goes on but the overall trend is the same: there are cuts everywhere as governments see the crisis as an opportunity to change the healthcare system! Over half of the nursing associations report pay cuts up to 25 per cent and rising unemployment for nurses; over a third of EFN members report concerns about quality of care and patient safety; and over one-fifth of EFN members report downgrading of nursing and substitution of nurses with unskilled workers. This has resulted in nurses working even harder than before to maintain quality standards, thus being asked to provide more for less. Nursing is a primarily female dominated profession and women are hardest hit. Nurses face the dilemma of providing quality care in an environment obsessed with cost with real implications for patient safety. Therefore, the EFN is not only worried about the effects of these cuts on nurses' welfare, working conditions, and salaries but also about the detrimental effect that this has on quality of care and patient safety, and the overall health status of the EU citizens! We have a responsibility to ensure that nurses are equipped with the necessary skills and have the proper foundation upon which to provide the level of care needed to meet the increasing societal challenges. It may take new innovative ways of thinking and a re-engineering of the healthcare system may be needed, but even in times of economic struggle when governments are forced to reduce budgets, delivery of healthcare and the working conditions of healthcare providers should not be compromised! The American Chamber of Commerce to the European Union (AmCham EU) recently released a statement on investment in healthcare which points to a "large body of research highlighting the role health plays in wealth and the importance of investment in health". Investing in healthcare and healthcare professionals will improve the health of the overall population and the benefits of this cannot be disputed! Those who argue against this favour medical tourism, favour 'blame and shame with benchmarking techniques' and most importantly, point at weaknesses to increase 'the return on investment'.

For the EFN, promoting research and using innovative tools and providing technical support to very specific programmes of change to ensure the sustainability of healthcare systems in place is one of the many ways to invest in the people driving the healthcare system. Therefore, bringing cost-effective and innovative, integrated care models to 53 regions throughout the EU and scaling up what already exists is key to making change over time happen. If we let go of one traditional pillar of the healthcare system, we will have a different mind-set and means to focus on prevention. The EFN is very committed to the EIP AHA as it is crucial that nurses drive change in non-communicable diseases, drive prevention and use the social cohesion funds (only 3% of the billions available are currently used for health) to support nurses in the communities at local and regional level to implement existing innovation initiatives on cost-effective integrated care models.

Europe has always faced challenges, but Europe shows their citizens can handle it. Please do not forget that not long ago there was a war in the Balkans, and that peace is central to a democracy, to a developing society. Nurses and women are key in society, democracy, in healthcare, in research and in politics. And while the negative effects of the crisis are manifested in all aspects of their everyday life, nurses remain hard-working, pro-active and positive in facing current and future challenges! The nurses are optimistic that if given the necessary tools, resources and attention, they can perform their tasks at a level and in an environment that fulfil their own needs and that of the patients. EPHA should strengthen the above-mentioned concepts throughout the EU policy-process. It may take time for some strategies or solutions to make a real impact but adopting a concrete approach, boosting social innovation and investing in our health workforce and re-design of health systems should be a top priority for the EU. I count on EPHA and its members to advocate in favour of these values and principles we all share and support each other to move forward.

The European Federation of Nurses Associations (EFN)
Registration Number 476.356.013
Clos du Parnasse 11A, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 512 74 19 Fax: +32 2 512 35 50
Email: efn@efn.be Website: www.efnweb.eu