

With the nursing profession becoming more innovative, public health stands to gain immensely. Paul De Raeve and Dorota Kilanska explain

Nursing and public health

The European Federation of Nurses Associations (EFN) is the authoritative political voice of the nursing profession in the European Union, representing three million nurses in the European institutions. We advocate the advancement of nursing to the betterment of the health and social care ecosystem – both in terms of recognition of qualifications (Directive 2013/55/EU) and scope of practice. These are sustained priorities, embodied in the development of the EFN workforce matrix, EFN competency framework underpinning article 31 of directive 55 and the design, together with key alliances, of EU guidelines on advanced practice, prevention and e-prescribing. These innovations are part of the European Commission growth strategy. For example, the outcomes delivered in Poland since its EU accession (2004) shows the progress nurses have made for society.

Advanced practice is a new way of delivering cost-effective care, which also increases patient access to experienced healthcare practitioners. For the EFN, an advanced nurse practitioner is authorised for practice at an advanced level of nursing and healthcare delivery, including public health and prevention. Across the developed world, the EFN has observed rapid development in the advanced roles that nurses fulfill in response to the population's increasing and changing healthcare needs; yet these need addressing within restricted budgets (DiCenso *et al.*, 2010).

Advanced roles are a way to improve access to care, contain provider-related costs and improve nurse recruitment and retention rates through enhanced career prospects (Buchan *et al.*, 2013). There are also



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clear patient benefits, since high-quality health and social care relies on a highly educated, dedicated and skilled workforce. Specifically, the promotion of advanced roles for nurses can boost quality, safety and cost-effectiveness of the healthcare delivered (Delamaire and Lafortune, 2010). These roles have made an enormous difference on the governance and management of the health and social care ecosystem, and have been shown to improve efficiency, enhance patient care and improve patient outcomes. This means they are ultimately contributing to the sustainability of that ecosystem. For example, nurse prescribing is an evolving area of advanced professional development which is intended to enhance professional capacity and the development of new skills that lead to services that are more patient-focused and deliver better outcomes.

Competencies driving development

It is in this context that the directive, article 31, on nurse competencies in particular, is key to an organised and collective strengthening of the nursing workforce, which has been shown to improve outcomes (Aiken *et al.*, 2014). With a view to ensuring clear and consistent developments in this area, the EFN members led the development of the EFN matrix which sets the scene for conversations on the three categories of nursing care, clarifying definitions, competencies and qualifications between the: general care nurse; specialist nurse; and the advanced practice nurse. Knowledge of public health is one of the transversal skills that all nurses are expected to have, next to the importance of e-skills.

Consistent translation of the directive's educational requirements is crucial in levelling out variances in quality and safety of healthcare in the EU. To this effect the EFN competency framework was developed in collaboration with





leading experts in education. It analyses the key nursing competencies expected of an EU nurse and translates them in a user-friendly guide complete with descriptions of what is to be achieved, the necessary education to be covered in the curricula, and a list of potential learning outcomes that would prove the acquisition of such competences.

A parallel initiative involved the development of guidelines for advance practice roles, fully appreciating that changes in education must be accompanied by changes in practice, organisation and policy. This guideline offers an evidence-based pathway to the deployment of e-health services for the introduction and development of advanced roles. It identifies the key steps to be taken and main issues to be considered. Importantly, it highlights the main context and process factors that are likely to act as barriers and facilitators to the process. The Guideline on Nurse Prescribing is as such a good example of an advanced practice, especially when it comes to combatting antimicrobial resistance (AMR). The innovation needs to respond to the societal challenges it is confronted with.

Nurses play a key role in the school setting

Public health advances

It is within this context that the guideline on prevention plays a crucial role in public health. Public health nurses are key within the modernisation of the European health and social ecosystems in which community care will get preferential treatment. According to the World Health Organization, public health “Refers to all organised measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole. Its activities aim to provide conditions in which people can be healthy and focus on entire populations, not on individual patients or diseases. Thus, public health is concerned with the total system and not only the eradication of a particular disease.”

It is important to highlight the general character of public health of which a close inter professional co-operation and collaboration is needed. For the promotion of public health the entirety of the health and social care workforce needs to work together, and be able to understand the strengths and limits of each separate profession that is active in the ecosystem. Nurses, physicians, pharmacists, physiotherapists and social workers all contribute in their own different way, and with their own different expertise, to educating and coaching the public towards a healthier life and wellbeing. However, somebody needs to lead, to manage, to make sure continuity of care is at the centre of integrated care, 24 hours, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Poland's experience

The Polish case illustrates how nurses with appropriate qualifications are needed for the design of an integrated health and social care ecosystem,

in which better promotion of public health is a key milestone. Between 2005 and 2015, over 40,000 nurses in Poland progressed their level of education, using European funds (about PLN 170m (~€38m)), to develop advanced skills to provide care in collaboration with other healthcare professionals such as physicians, and independently as nursing professionals. In the area of public health, nurses work independently in many places, and as such comply with article 31 of European directive 55. Each family nurse delivered services to 2,750 clients in different settings, whereas school nurses visited 880 pupils for public health at schools in the country.

During the last 15 years the budget of the Polish Ministry of Health saw PLN 80m spent on developing nurses' skills using continuing professional development. In Poland there are nurses with high qualifications but without competencies to work with or in the 'health team' as an autonomous partner. Since 1999 Poland has been experiencing continuous changes in healthcare, and today it is time to use nurses' competencies to develop public health policy. Advancing the role of nurses in Poland is therefore key to developing cost-effective and high quality services in the entire health and social ecosystem, including the size and quality of the public health sector. Advanced nurse practitioners in primary care settings provide care equivalent to that provided by physicians in these settings, which positively influenced patient satisfaction and empowerment.

Another example are school nurses, who promote actions in favour of health protection and promotion, while serving as spokespersons for health issues faced by pupils; especially those who are ill and disabled. The school nurse is a co-ordinator of actions undertaken in favour of pupils' health. The nurse, in the fulfilment of tasks, co-operates with members of the interdisciplinary team. These nurses' independent interventions have taken place for about 18 years now (this refers to the period of individual contracts with the National Health Fund) and the evidence provided has proven it works well. A school nurse works autonomously, makes all the decisions independently without any support from physicians, takes full responsibility for nursing care plans, and maintains the health of young people and sometimes fulfils the role of a mother in a new environment.

Over the years we have observed an increase in the number of school children with health problems. The number of injuries has increased significantly, as has the number of posture defects, sight defects, bronchial asthma sufferers, children with cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, behaviour disorders, ADHD, and pupils who overdose on painkillers and have contact with drugs. This is why the continuous updating of a nurse's knowledge and the upgrading of professional qualifications is so important (Zajac 2016).

Contributing positively

To conclude, the nursing profession can and will contribute to the EU growth agenda; embracing innovation as the solution for the societal challenges we are all confronted with. Governments and policy makers need to embrace these innovations to build resilient ecosystems for the health and social care sector. Nurses' autonomy, as set out in directive

55, is the cornerstone for moving towards resilient systems, empowering women to lead change. The EFN sees these developments as a pressing matter given the increasing and changing health and social needs of EU citizens that demand better ways of organising and delivering both types of care. Within a context of tighter health and social budgets and rising demands for high quality and safe care, advanced roles for nurses are the key to making the best use of resources and improving outcomes.

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