



# Medical Deserts and the Health Workforce crisis in the EU

Dr Ole Johan Bakke, *CPME President*

High level conference on Healthcare Human Resources crisis: Small countries facing future risks  
11 April 2025, Riga (Latvia)



We represent national medical associations across Europe, covering roughly:

# 1.7 million European Doctors from 37 countries

We are committed to contributing the medical profession's point of view to EU institutions and European policy-making through pro-active cooperation on a wide range of health and healthcare related issues.



We promote the highest level of medical training and practice but also the provision of evidence-based, ethical and equitable healthcare services.

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(Austrian Medical Chamber)



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Sveriges läkarförbund  
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# Ambitions for building the European Health Union



## Health Check for Europe 2024-2029

European doctors' ambitions to continue building the European Health Union:

1. Tackle the health workforce crisis
2. Ensure a safe digital transformation of healthcare
3. Enable healthier living
4. Guarantee accessibility and effectiveness of medicines
5. Take climate action for better health



# European Parliament event on Health Workforce crisis

- Doctors from over 30 countries brought their voices to the European Parliament to share their stories at an event hosted by MEP Dr András Kulja and MEP Tilly Metz, in collaboration with CPME.
- The meeting clearly outlined that European countries healthcare systems faced shared workforce challenges and action is needed to tackle the workforce crisis.







# CPME workforce activities in the past



## EUROPEAN MEDICAL ORGANISATIONS' JOINT STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST DOCTORS AND OTHER HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The right to health is a fundamental pillar of human rights. It remains applicable in all circumstances and doctors have an ethical duty to ensure they treat the injured and sick.

European Medical Organisations reaffirm that physicians' safety at work is the basis of quality healthcare. European as well as international medical organisations observe that doctors and other health professionals, working in hospitals, general and private practice, are increasingly confronted with situations of violence, sometimes extreme, in their daily practice, outside any context of conflict.

European Medical Organisations are concerned that this worrying trend is contrary to international human rights and medical ethics. It may hinder or prevent the provision of care that must be protected as effectively as possible. It is urgent and capital to take concrete and urgent actions to protect European doctors from all forms of violence that occur during daily medical practice, be it physical, verbal and/or psychological. European Medical Organisations recognise the hugely negative impact violence has on the socio-psychological wellbeing of doctors and other health professionals, the care received by patients and its contribution to rising levels of burnout experienced by the health workers in their workplace.

European Medical Organisations call on governments and all stakeholders to show political commitment and to be aware of the urgent need to protect medical personnel in the performance of their work. We ask for the establishment of an effective reporting and assisting mechanism for victims across Europe, for the implementation of violence prevention programmes and for the enforcement of existing laws concerning violence against doctors and other health professionals in the workplace. We ask them to take all necessary measures to ensure access to quality care for all patients while protecting the freedom and safety of medical personnel and healthcare facilities.

European Medical Organisations commit to cooperating closely in the framework of the EMOs Joint Working group on violence against doctors and other health professionals under CEOM leadership, to ensure that the European medical profession is acting as one.



PRESS RELEASE

10 March 2023, Brussels

## Violence against healthcare professionals: a rising threat to the health workforce and patient care

Violence against healthcare professionals is increasing at an alarming rate across Europe. On Sunday 12 March we mark the 4th European Awareness Day of Violence Against Doctors and other Healthcare Professionals to raise attention and catalyse action.

The World Health Organization [reports](#) that up to 38% of healthcare professionals suffer physical violence at some point in their careers, and many more are exposed to verbal and online abuse. Such aggression can have devastating consequences, including physical injuries, impacts on mental health, and in the most extreme cases even death.



COMITÉ PERMANENT DES MÉDECINS EUROPÉENS  
STANDING COMMITTEE OF EUROPEAN DOCTORS

CPME/AD/EC/12032015/009\_Final/EN

On 12 March 2015, the CPME Executive Committee adopted the 'CPME Response to the Public Consultation on the Review of the Working Time Directive (Directive 2003/88/EC)' (CPME 2015/009FINAL)

## CPME Response to the Public Consultation on the Review of the Working Time Directive (Directive 2003/88/EC)



## Consensus Statement of the European Medical Organisations on Continuing Professional Development Luxembourg, 2015

## Welcome to the pages of the EU Joint Action on Health Workforce Planning & Forecasting

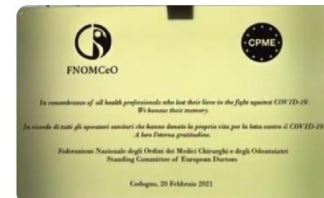
This Joint Action aims to improve the capacity for health workforce planning and forecasting by supporting European collaboration



European Doctors @CPME... · 23 Feb  
Four years ago this week the first COVID-19 patient in Europe was treated in Italy

Our memorial plaque with @FNOMCeO is a daily reminder of the doctors and other colleagues in the health professions who lost their lives during the pandemic

We honour their memory



European Doctors  
@CPME\_EUROPA

Our General Assembly adopted a statement of concern over UK government action seeking to limit doctors' #RightToStrike

We also express concern and opposition to the trend of physician substitution by 'Physician Assistants'

Full statement: [cpme.eu/news/european-...](https://cpme.eu/news/european-...)

## European doctors' concern over right to strike and physician substitution



The BMA and 5 others

12:16 PM · Nov 14, 2023 · 64.2K Views



COMITÉ PERMANENT DES MÉDECINS EUROPÉENS  
STANDING COMMITTEE OF EUROPEAN DOCTORS

CPME/AD/Brd/140309/034 final/EN

At the CPME Board Meeting in Prague on 14 March 2009, CPME adopted the following document 'GREEN PAPER on the European Workforce for Health' (CPME 2009/034 final EN/Fr) (referring to CPME 2008/034 EN/Fr)

## GREEN PAPER on the European Workforce for Health

CPME comments to the Commission consultation

CPME welcomes this Green paper and the opportunity to comment the issues it addresses. The European doctors consider a well-educated, motivated and sufficient health workforce as a necessity to guarantee high quality of care and safety of patients in all European countries. It is therefore important to link health workforce issues to the ongoing work of the European Union in the field of patient safety.



POLICY NOVEMBER 2023

The Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) represents national medical associations across Europe. We are committed to contributing the medical profession's point of view to EU and European policy-making through pro-active cooperation on a wide range of health and healthcare related issues.

## Policy on Doctors' Well-being: Promoting Work-Life Balance and Supportive Environments

O. Recommendations:

Healthcare institutions should:

- Implement interventions that prioritise enhancing working conditions while ensuring a safe and secure environment at the workplace. Employers must ensure that provisions relating to appropriate working conditions are complied with.
- Implement benchmarks for minimum workforce capacities in healthcare to ensure safe staffing levels. This is only possible with fair financial remuneration.
- Establish confidential, easily accessible mental health services for doctors, including counselling, therapy, and helplines, while also promoting education programmes to reduce stigma and encourage doctors to seek help through clinical leadership involvement.



# Health workforce crisis in the EU

- Healthcare professionals are the backbone of the health system.
- Excessive workload, violence and verbal abuse towards healthcare professionals is rising with devastating consequences for their mental and physical health.
- Dysfunctional digitalisation of healthcare increasing administrative burden on doctors.
- Medicine's declining appeal as a lifelong profession threatens the sustainability of the health workforce.



Image: iStock





# Policies on health workforce



POLICY NOVEMBER 2023

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- Implement interventions to enhance working conditions and ensure a safe and secure environment.
- Ensure effective enforcement of existing EU labor legislation such as Working Time Directive and Parental Leave Directive.
- Implement benchmarks for minimum workforce capacities for safe staffing levels.



## European Medical Organisations' joint Policy on the Health Workforce crisis

## 1. Introduction:

The European Medical Organisations recognise the urgent need for immediate and coordinated action to tackle the health workforce crisis gripping Europe.

The ongoing health workforce crisis should not be considered merely a result of an increase in retirements of health professionals, not compensated by recruitment; it is a multifaceted challenge driven by various factors. These include rising demands for healthcare services due to demographic shifts, the enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and evolving consumer expectations regarding healthcare delivery.

- In 2025, CPME and 8 other European Medical Organisations adopted a joint Policy on the Health Workforce crisis.
- Immediate and coordinated action is needed to tackle the health workforce crisis.
- Shared recommendations including addressing workload and management, addressing working conditions, and investing in education and training.



# Medical deserts

- Medical deserts include both rural and underserved areas lacking enough doctors.
- Shortages of doctors and unsafe staffing levels lead to excessive workloads and poor working conditions.
- In some countries, rural doctor shortages prevent physicians from taking leave or retiring.



Image: AI Generated





# Strategies to address medical deserts

- There is no quick fix or short cuts, effective recruitment and retention strategies need to be designed and implemented.
- Our members have reported on several promising approaches including:

Recruiting medical students from rural areas, as they are more likely to stay after completing training.

Promoting exposure to rural practice through workplace visits or internships in family medicine practices in remote areas.

Implementing policies to attract doctors to underserved areas, including through the use of financial incentives.

- Incentive-based retention strategies must be prioritised over forced allocation to ensure long-term sustainability, job satisfaction, and prevent burnout.



# Improve data collection on Health Workforce



- Accurate data collection is critical to assessing the true capacity of healthcare professionals available for care delivery.
- Using reporting standards like Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) enhances health workforce forecasting and supports more reliable, robust workforce planning.
- Better reporting and collection of data on the health workforce facilitates objective measurement of the effectiveness of recruitment and retention strategies.



# Recommendations & Conclusions

- There has been insufficient political prioritization of the health workforce for far too long.
- Greater European cooperation is essential to address the health workforce crisis.
- A coordinated effort across policy areas is needed to improve retention and recruitment of healthcare professionals.
- We need an EU Health Workforce Strategy!



# Thank you for your attention!

For more information, please contact CPME Secretariat:

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