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Possible shortage of up to two million health care workers by 2020 – EU taking action to prevent impending crisis in providing health care

Health as a job creator: Health professions make up one of the largest segments in the overall European labor market, accounting for ten percent of the total workforce. The EU Commission calculates dramatic shortages in health care provision in the next decade unless countermeasures are taken now. Experts at the European Health Forum Gastein discussed how health jobs can be made more attractive.

Bad Hofgastein, October 8, 2010 –The statistics are alarming. “Estimates point to a shortage of one million health professionals in the EU by 2020, and this is likely to reach two million if other employees in the healthcare sector are accounted for,” said Katja Neubauer, Team Leader Health Strategy and Health Systems in the EU Commission (DG for Health and Consumers), today at European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). The forecasts predict a shortage of 600,000 workers in nursing alone by 2020 and a shortage of 230,000 physicians.

About 600 decision makers in health policy, research, and science and in patients’ organizations from over 40 countries are currently attending the European Union’s most important health policy congress in Bad Hofgastein, Austria, to discuss crucial future topics related to Europe’s health care systems. Experts say the big challenge for European healthcare systems is the steady increase in life expectancy and an associated need for more care on the one hand and the urgent task of successfully recruiting and retaining health professionals.

Neubauer noted that the healthcare system is already an important driver for new jobs in Europe and could become even more so in the future: “Healthcare provides employment for around 10% of the EU workforce. It is one of the most innovative sectors and could drive the creation of new jobs.”

Initiatives for preventing a crisis in the delivery of healthcare

Neubauer warned: “In a worst case scenario, the threatened shortage of professionals in the healthcare sector could mean that about 15 percent of necessary care for patients could not be met.”

The effect of this gap in supply would vary from one individual EU member state to another. The poorer Member States might find it more difficult to retain a sufficient number of health professionals making the shortage of professionals all the more acute in these countries.

A number of activities are underway at the European level to address this and the other challenges facing the European health workforce. In 2008 the EU Commission issued its Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health, thus placing the topic on the European agenda. As part of the Europe 2020 Strategy to overcome the crisis and prepare the EU economy for the next decade, one of the flagship initiatives will be to set an agenda for new skills and jobs. Health professions will be included in these efforts. And at the initiative of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, a conference of ministers was recently held on health personnel issues of the future and formulated a number of recommendations.

Making health professions more appealing

Health professions and the work environment in patient care must be made more appealing. Experts call this a central point for preventing a genuine crisis in health care provision. “Evidence suggests that the work environment not only constitutes an important factor in the recruitment and retention of health workers, its characteristics also affect the quality of care, both directly and indirectly,” said

expert Christiane Wiskow (Basel, CH) at the EHFG. “Examples of what can be done to improve the quality of the work environment in the health sector include policy approaches to promote a healthy balance between family life and work, and better protection of workers’ health.”

With this approach, the sector aims to discourage health workers from switching to other occupations and hopes to recruit new people for health professions and prepare this body of skilled workers for the challenges of the future.

Expert: Worries about quantity should not lead us to neglect quality

In their discussions in Gastein, experts said, it was essential not only that there is a sufficient number of workers available in the health field but also that those workers deliver a quality performance. The expectations of health care systems on the part of patients and society in general have risen in recent years. The use of innovative technologies and complex processes increases the need for regulation, Dr. Edwin Borman (UK) emphasized at the EHFG: “The world has learned the lesson that failures in regulation, most recently in the finance sector, can be very costly. In the healthcare sector, these costs are counted in lives damaged or lost. Ensuring high quality in the delivery of healthcare services is a key challenge of healthcare regulation. If we fail to deliver, we shall be as popular as bankers. If we deliver the necessary changes, a new professionalism will characterize the future of healthcare.”

Forum 6b “Investing in Europe’s health workforce of tomorrow”; Workshop 7 “Health Workforce of tomorrow”: Hosted by DG Health and Consumers, European Commission and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. Friday, October 8, 2010

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