



OPENING REMARKS

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For many years, the severe shortage of health workers around the world has been identified by the WHO as one of the most critical constraints to achieving health and development goals¹. Recently, the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME)² - invited today as well as the WHO - officially requested concrete actions for retention and recruitment by the European institutions.

Doctors must have lawful working conditions and safe staffing levels. The pandemic has exacerbated existing problems, such as workforce shortages, and raised new challenges, such as building emergency capacity. In this regard, for example, on 13 December 2023, as a member of the HERA Civil Society Forum, we called for increased training of health workers to prepare for future health threats, particularly in light of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic³.

Excessive workload, violence and verbal abuse against health workers - by colleagues, superiors, but also by users, citizens and patients, as also revealed by our survey that

¹ www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/q-a-on-the-health-workforce-crisis

² www.cpme.eu/api/documents/adopted/2024/01/health-check-for-europe-2024-2029.pdf

³ https://health.ec.europa.eu/latest-updates/hera-civil-society-forum-calls-enhanced-healthcare-professional-training-prepare-future-health-2023-12-19_en

will be presented shortly - are on the rise, with devastating consequences on their mental and physical health. Medicine is losing its attractiveness as a life-long profession, and if we continue in this path we will not have a functioning healthcare workforce⁴. Not to mention medical desertification - a topic we addressed here in the European Parliament just a year ago - in an attempt to help reduce health inequalities. From the point of view of citizens and patients, this situation risks jeopardising progress in access to care, the high quality standards of healthcare facilities and, above all, mutual trust and dialogue between health professionals and the population.

The paradox is that, despite having common goals to achieve, health workers' associations and patient advocacy groups (PAGs) are not in contact with each other and do not proceed in a coordinated way.

In view of this scenario, Active Citizenship Network - the European branch of the Italian NGO Cittadinanzattiva - decided to dedicate the annual celebration of the European Patients' Rights Day to the health workers' crisis, bringing together European institutions, health workers' representatives and leaders of civil society and PAGs.

The crisis that health workers are going through undermines the objective of making national health services more resilient, as well as making vague the prospect of a European Health Union, proclaimed in 2020 by the President of the European Commission as the first point of her mandate, to the alarm of an already announced pandemic ("We need to build a stronger European Health Union")⁵.

Obviously, these three aspects (job strain, skill shortage, medical desertification) undermine the right to health and - with our guests, whom I thank in advance - we will address them not in terms of trade union demands but of public policy. Also in

⁴ www.cpme.eu/api/documents/adopted/2024/01/health-check-for-europe-2024-2029.pdf

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655

order to relaunch a doctor/patient alliance based - although in the distinction of roles and responsibilities - on the mutual recognition of legitimate needs.

Therefore, for once, on the occasion of the celebration of the European Patients' Rights Day, PAGs & civil organisations are called to confront each other not starting from the health needs we fight for in our daily lives, but from the needs that the health workforce feels it has to fulfil. Indeed, one aspect cannot presume the other.

The pre-election period offers the opportunity to ask the new MEPs for a series of commitments on these issues, but it also imposes us to point out that the health of European citizens is, so far, completely out of the pre-election debate.

For the sake of honesty, it must be said that - without any doubt - the outgoing European Parliament was the one that cared most about the health of European citizens. It did so out of necessity; no one will ever forget what we experienced with the pandemic. For this, we must give credit to all the European institutions.

But we wish the next European Parliament would do the same not out of necessity but out of choice.

We firmly believe that the health conditions of European citizens deserve proper attention from those who will be called upon to take decisions representing 450 million European citizens.

For this reason, we are feeding the pre-election debate, asking those who intend to run for re-election what their commitment will be, if elected, to improve the living and health conditions of European citizens.

Furthermore, after the European elections, we want to propose the establishment of a Public Health Committee within the new European Parliament; alternatively, the reinstatement of the Public Health Subcommittee, established in Feb. 2023 within the ENVI Committee⁶ (the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety).

And, as far as we are concerned, we are committed to re-establishing the MEPs Interest Group "European Patients' Rights & Cross-border Healthcare", for what would be its third mandate, a unicum of its kind. Not least because, in fact, our Interest Group, together with other Interest Groups on specific health issues, has acted as a kind of supplementary and/or adjuvandum action to multiply reflections/confrontations/proposals within the European Parliament. And on these proposals I would also be pleased to hear your feedback.

In conclusion, the health workforce crisis requires immediate and coordinated action. The upcoming European elections offer a unique opportunity to collectively tackle this problem and implement lasting solutions that prioritise the welfare of health workers and greater protection of patients' rights across Europe.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a fruitful event.

⁶ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/sant/about>