
Belgian EU Presidency Seeks Robust Health Workforce Strategy



The Belgian EU presidency is actively laying the groundwork for a future EU health workforce strategy, seeking to intensify efforts beyond the minimal Council conclusions on this matter from 2010.

Addressing the challenges faced by the EU's health workforce is a top priority for the Belgian presidency, with an eye towards establishing a comprehensive strategy for the EU health workforce.

Pedro Facon, who oversees health workforce issues for the Belgian presidency and is the vice president of Belgian National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance said: "***The health workforce is a recurring challenge. Although complex due to its multifaceted nature, it's evident that there are widespread struggles within this area.***"

The European Commission's State of Health in the EU report from December 2023 highlighted that every EU nation is grappling with health workforce challenges, ranging from an ageing workforce to difficulties in education, recruitment, retention, and upskilling of health professionals. The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes the crisis as comprising several smaller crises, touching on issues such as labour, mental health, education, gender equality, and financial investment.

Reflecting on the 2010 Belgian Council presidency, conclusions were made on "investing in Europe's health workforce of tomorrow". Now, following fourteen years and a pandemic, there is momentum for enhanced EU-level intervention.

Looking ahead to future mandates, Facon emphasized the desire for EU health ministers to acknowledge the necessity of a detailed, overarching health workforce strategy that complements national policies and initiatives from WHO and the OECD.

Preparations are in progress, with a key event being a conference on the future of the EU Health Union scheduled for 26–27 March. It will feature a workshop aimed at devising a more effective EU policy framework for the health workforce. The outcomes of this workshop will guide discussions at an informal health ministers' meeting on 23-24 April, hopefully leading to formal conclusions at an EPSCO meeting on 21 June.

Additionally, there are plans to conduct a thorough review of the EU's regulatory framework affecting the health workforce, examining the impact of various directives on national challenges.

Compared to the 2010 Council conclusions, which focused on softer actions like sharing best practices, the current approach aims for more tangible outcomes. Facon highlighted past efforts to coordinate health workforce planning and forecasting but stressed that the current strategy seeks to elicit more concrete actions.

Addressing criticisms regarding countries' reluctance to invest in healthcare workforces, Facon pointed out Belgium's initiatives to increase wages and called for a reform-minded attitude among professional associations. He also noted a shift in member states' willingness to engage in EU-level health actions post-COVID-19, advocating for a unified approach akin to the EU's cancer plan.

Facon concluded by emphasizing the potential for setting common goals across EU countries on issues like worker shortages, working conditions, and mental health, underscoring the importance of a collective effort in tackling the health workforce challenges.

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Published on : Thu, 15 Feb 2024