



## REVIEW

# HEALTH WITHOUT NURSES

They are too few in number, put under too much pressure, and given too little social and economic recognition of their profession's value. Nurses are the pillars of people's health and care and they are in a dire situation. Improving it means giving new strength to health systems and helping build universal health coverage.

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## NURSES: AN ESSENTIAL RESOURCE

May 12, 2023, was International Nurses Day and a chance to consider the situation of nursing care – with its many, persistent critical areas and its future prospects.

The world's nursing personnel includes 27.9 million professionals, about 59% of health workers. They are significant both in numbers and qualitatively, considering their role in care and health in hospitals, long-term care facilities, and in the community. This is true both in ordinary and extraordinary situations, such as during the Covid 19 pandemic where nurses made the difference in varied settings. These ranged from managing mobile clinics in Botswana to reach rural areas and intensive care to their support in the research and development of vaccines and drug therapies in the United Kingdom.

This went beyond the rhetoric about “hero nurses” that never translated into better protections and guarantees – increased salaries, better contractual conditions, logistical and psychological support, training – nor a recognition of the scientific and management contribution they make to the health system.

## SNAPSHOT OF A CRISIS

In 2020, WHO warned that there was a shortfall of 5.9 million nurses worldwide, almost a quarter of the current workforce, which is 28 million people. The greatest shortage was in the lower-middle income areas of Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean. This shortage seems set to grow due to the increase in demand, mass resignations, and low replacement rates. In Italy alone, there is a shortage of 65,000 nurses with a ratio of 1.6 nurses per doctor as opposed to 3 as suggested by international standards.

Many studies have given a snapshot of the group's professional

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- 3 The Future of Nursing: lessons from a Pandemic  
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- 4 Financial Times

and personal challenges. an article in *The Lancet Regional Health Western Pacific* reported a shortfall of nearly 140,000 nurses in China, showing that 34% of them considered themselves to be burned out and 56% showed symptoms of depression during the pandemic. A 2022 survey in Belgium showed that 44% of nurses would like to leave their jobs. Around the world, nurses have gone on strike against low wages and unsafe working conditions, with a great variety of outcomes: from improved agreements achieved in Germany to a ban on strikes by health workers in Zimbabwe.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

The year 2020 was the *International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife*, marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, a pioneer of modern nursing care, to highlight the importance of the role of nursing staff.

For the occasion, WHO, ICN (International Council of Nurses), and Nursing Now published the State of Nursing in the World Report including general guidelines to address the shortage of nursing staff and how to proceed in the future. Some of these suggestions specifically stress:

- The need to invest in high-level nurse training, responding to the global and local health needs, in step with technological innovation and able to understand current health and social needs;
- The goal of training at least 6 million new nurses by 2030, especially in middle- and low-income countries to make up for the shortages and make the local health systems more resilient. This includes the goal of rebalancing the migration flows that transfer nurses from developing countries to high-income countries with health systems that can absorb them;
- Enhancing the role and involvement of nurses on the decision-making, policy-making, and scientific levels, recognizing the skills and work in the field of these health professionals.

<https://www.ft.com/content/402df6ca-5098-40ca-9cc8-bae331c39398>

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