



European
Commission

DG Health and Food Safety

Executive Summary of SEPEN outcomes in the health workforce field

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

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PDF ISBN 978-92-76-27508-4 doi: 10.2875/672205 EW-06-20-196-EN-N

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Background

Effective strategic planning of the health workforce (HWF) is of crucial importance in the European Union and worldwide. Moreover, as the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, the importance and value of the health workforce planning and managing have become even more evident and significant as a key element for healthcare systems. Without having a reliable and resilient health workforce and an adequate HWF planning system, countries might face a constant increase in severe challenges in ensuring adequate staffing of healthcare systems to cope with the significant pressure on healthcare provision in the coming years. SEPEN was dedicated to create a network of experts including various professionals in the field of HWF, and to facilitate exchanges on practical expertise for Member States to support them in creating a strong HWF planning and policy.

Aims of the SEPEN Tender

The "Support for the Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting Expert Network¹" gathered experts into one community in order to focus on various topics related to HWF strengthening and developing across Europe. The EU has dedicated significant attention to the field of HWF planning in the last decade, and SEPEN built significantly on the results of previous EU funded projects, e.g. the Joint Action on European HWF Planning and Forecasting (JA EUHWF 2013-2016).

SEPEN was launched in September 2017, and the objectives of its three-year duration work were to make a direct impact on HWF planning and policy in the form of five designated work packages, as well as sustaining cross-country cooperation and support Member States to increase knowledge, share good practices, improve tools and generate effective HWF planning processes and policies.

The work of the SEPEN Joint Tender revolved around the enhancement and sharing of knowledge on HWF planning methods and policy issues across Europe, looking at emerging skill needs for the HWF, data requirements for supply or demand-based planning models, health labour market dynamics, HWF mobility and migration, recruitment and retention, improving HWF working conditions, quality of care, as well as mental health as part of a supportive working environment, and digital transformation of health care systems.

SEPEN KEY RESULTS

The Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting Expert Network

The SEPEN network is an active community in health workforce planning and forecasting, counting close to four hundred experts. Throughout the course of the Tender, the Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting Expert Network has been established and activated. The SEPEN Expert Network was developed by creating a master database, starting from the group of several expert members of the JA EUHWF network. Further research was completed to enhance the network comprising intersectoral and multidisciplinary stakeholders covering all EU MS and involving identified network hubs. Synergies with other expert networks related to HWF and system research, policy and development were also identified and experts were invited to participate. The SEPEN expert network is composed of close to four hundred experts from all EU Member States and the United Kingdom, representatives from 30 non-EU countries,

¹ The SEPEN joint tender was funded by the 3rd Health programme of the European Union through the Chafea Service Contract Number 2016 73 01. It was led by Semmelweis University (SU), Hungary, and members of the consortium included the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), KU Leuven, Ministero della Salute (MDS), and Agenzia Nazionale per i Servizi Sanitari Regionali (AGENAS).



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39 representatives from European and 12 from international organisations. The continuously evolving network provided a valuable basis for designing, creating and putting effective mechanisms in place to coordinate and manage the sharing of knowledge on all dimensions of HWF planning and policy among its members, thereby facilitating knowledge uptake among Member States.

Mapping of national HWF planning systems and related policies

SEPEN strengthened and updated the evidence-base in health workforce planning and policy, and concluded some essential developments at national level in the EU. A significant result of the SEPEN Tender is the mapping study presenting the state of play of HWF planning and related policies in the European Member States, including the United Kingdom. Following a literature review and a desk research of already existing frameworks and policies, the MS profiles were pre-filled with the latest available data. As the next phase, data were gathered, collected and validated by key country informants in each of the MS, and the information was incorporated into EU country profiles, supported by more detailed online appendices with links to key documents. The results of the mapping study and the country fiches generated were then finally consolidated in the form of an online e-book referencing legal frameworks, decisions, laws and regulations and plans of ongoing or upcoming actions, listed in the online appendices. The platform entitled “HWF Planning and Policy Repository” provides valuable information on advancement of Member States in HWF policy and planning and is available on the [tender website](#). Such in-depth overview provides the basis for improving HWF policy and planning methods across the EU, and can also serve as an essential tool for supporting evidence-based health system planning, capacity building, and health workforce planning at regional, national, and international level. To ensure the long-term impact of the results and outputs, updating and enhancing the content of the repository is recommended to be further developed and sustained.

HWF planning systems

The main findings of the study concluded that 75% of EU Member States have HWF planning systems in place. Both health workforce planning objectives and systems tend to differ significantly in the European Union, and the time horizon of forecasting varies widely. The four main categories of systems are: planning of subsidised education and setting training quotas, resource planning of NHS supply, geographic strategic planning of (public) health facilities including their staffing and planning of health insurance system including the health care providers. The focus remains mainly on the planning of medical professionals (GPs, medical specialists), but an enhancement towards the five sectoral health professions (physicians, dentists, nurses, midwives, pharmacists) is prevalent in a growing number of countries. A few countries expanded their focus to include all health professions in the planning models. With regards to structural characteristics, HWF planning is a separate planning system in most of the Member States, but there is a growing trend of shifting towards a more comprehensive national health system and capacity planning.

HWF planning data

The findings on health workforce data availability and main sources revealed that all EU Member States maintain data on supply on the individual or professional level. Such data are based on registers, but data ownership varies among countries. The diversity of demand data is more significant compared to supply data. Seventeen countries use all types of healthcare consumption data to estimate demand, while a limited number of countries are using epidemiological data. Specific data on population demand and needs are collected in a scarce number of countries. Some of these countries organise specific surveys to obtain such data. With regards to mobility data, most countries collect some data on foreign-trained and foreign-born professionals. The inflow of foreign professionals is appropriately recorded in several Member States, while the outflow however, is commonly difficult to capture. Many countries build some estimates on the intention-to-leave data supported by certificates for recognition of healthcare qualifications that are requested before delivering care in another country. A growing number of countries rely on the OECD outflow information. In general, methodological differences and timeliness of data are significant limitations



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in international comparability and precise tracking of mobility trends. Bilateral/international data exchange initiatives may further increase the validity and completeness of international mobility analyses.

Major national HWF challenges

Regarding the most important current and future challenges, two main types of challenges that countries are facing were reported by the country informants: methodological challenges in health workforce planning (e.g. data quality, planning models) and policy-related health workforce challenges (e.g. shortages, imbalances in geographical distribution or skill-mix, outflows). Several countries are moving from a mainly operational focus of HWF planning to a more strategic and comprehensive focus of HWF planning in the processes of reorganising their health system, such as shifting to prevention and primary care, skill-mix optimisations, introduction of new professions, patient empowerment and self-care management, and telemedicine.

HWF policies

Managing shortages and maldistribution of skills is a high priority in many Member States. A majority of countries report on shortages of general practitioners and of some medical specialists, mainly in remote and rural areas, as well as a persistent shortage of nurses. Most Member States tend to regulate the admission to training in health professional education, mainly by setting training and/or resident quotas or by funding a limited number of candidates. The status of continuous professional development (CPD) is relatively mixed across Europe. CPD is mandatory for most sectoral professions in two thirds of the countries, while in the other third, the same programmes are voluntary. Moreover, there is a significant heterogeneity in CPD requirements between different professions. Concerning HWF mobility, there is a major difference in planning models between source and destination countries. Source countries tend to focus on the management of outflow, while destination countries often tend to rely on foreign-trained workforce which is creating tensions between both types of countries.

Effective knowledge transfer and tailored-guidance benefiting the Member States

SEPEN managed to foster the dialogue in various channels about accumulating knowledge, the latest experiences and good practices in Europe, and provided targeted discussions on key issues of HWF planning and policy. One objective of SEPEN evolved around providing opportunities for knowledge sharing and exchanging good practices between HWF planning and policies relevant stakeholders, and to bring experts from MS with similar HWF characteristics or planning needs together. Utilising the active network, this aim has been achieved by organising 11 webinars on the online forum - set through the EU Health Policy Platform (EU HPP) -, organising 5 thematic workshops on-site and online, and managing 3 national exchanges of expertise in three beneficiary Member States. In addition, the SEPEN website and a total of 10 newsletters ensured a wider outreach and increasing impact of SEPEN activities at a larger scale regarding advancing stakeholder dialogues on HWF planning and policy.

The webinars and workshops focussed on specific high-interest and key topics related to HWF policy and planning, such as future skill needs of the HWF, HWF mobility and planning data, supportive working environment and mental health, quality of care and patient safety, and digital transformation of health systems, implications of Brexit from the HWF planning perspective, interprofessional education, or ethical recruitment of health personnel. All events proved to be successful in increasing the interest and providing a platform for co-creation and information exchange between Member State representatives and experts from different disciplines and national settings. The 5 workshops were followed by more than 200 registered participants in total. Several workshops were streamed on the SEPEN communication channels; presentations, useful materials and public reports of these events were also shared with the experts as well as the public audience.



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Highlights from the webinars and workshops

Addressing and managing acute shortages of health professionals is essential, particularly for nurses, and for the health and care workforce. New initiatives should also improve sensitivity towards digital care solutions and promote digital transformation of the healthcare provision, strengthen eHealth policies influencing the organisation of care, and enhance resilience of healthcare providers in emergency situations by using effective change management practices. Knowledge transfer between Member States should be continuously fostered to enable the deployment of new strategies and models of care. For instance, exchanging experiences and methods to recruit and retain HWF appropriately, to upscale the HWF with transversal skills, or to create new professions and new roles of professionals can contribute to more effective HWF management and planning. Discussions also highlight the benefits of task shifting and sharing opportunities for more effective care provision. One should also recognise the importance of developing more supportive working environments, and securing mental health and well-being of the HWF in the current fragile health systems globally. In order to effectively implement such initiatives, leadership and governance has to be strengthened at different levels by focusing on shared roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and increasing engagement and coordination of actions intersectorally.

Effective ways of HWF development and the formula to tailor MS needs

Another major pillar contributing to a more resilient and effective HWF planning system was the tailored advice and guidance offered to MS by the SEPEN expert network. The activities were designed to support HWF planning improvements on the national and regional levels, drawing significantly on JA EUHWF outcomes. Following the launch of the call for interest among MS, nine MS showed interest and an overall of three national exchanges were organised in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The exchanges were conducted in the form of workshops, training, and peer review type interventions, and involved a team of experts from the SEPEN network and various national and regional level stakeholders, (e.g. governmental bodies and further stakeholder representatives from the health and care sectors). As a result of the activities, the three MS gained a clear picture of their HWF planning system, and secured valuable knowledge on methods and tools in improving HWF planning, and on good practices and policies in HWF planning.

Future considerations

Maintain the interest towards HWF planning

Building on the SEPEN outcomes, it is recommended to **maintain the EU-level support on targeted initiatives, and support national implementation** and comparative studies addressing HWF-related issues identified during the SEPEN activities, e.g. by conducting situation analysis, identifying good practices tailored to local context and learning from new case studies.

To ensure sustainability continuity and development of the HWF knowledge, it is recommended to **maintain and expand the community of European health workforce experts** relevant from the HWF planning perspective. Strengthening synergies with other interconnected networks, involving stakeholders from various sectors (e.g. education, healthcare industry, social care, etc.) and broader involvement of experts in different roles (e.g. policy level, academia, health professional representatives) should be facilitated in the future. In addition, **identifying thematic sub-networks**, for instance an international “HWF Policy HUB” comprising of high-level decision makers, policy analysts and policy experts is advised in order to influence national level implementation of HWF planning in MS. One solution could be a list of SEPEN experts with a governmental background or reviving the EU Expert Group on HWF.



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Maintain the exchange of expertise

Overall, throughout the three years of the SEPEN, the activities achieved successful results in the monitoring of HWF planning systems and in highlighting key policy challenges and solutions among the EU Member States. The SEPEN tender provided a thorough and valuable input for moving towards a more comprehensive focus in HWF planning, identifying key issues for future developments. The growing body of evidence and knowledge on HWF planning and the outputs of SEPEN can further facilitate **continued engagement of experts** as well as relevant stakeholders in HWF development and related policies in the EU, and the results of the SEPEN tender can **provide good practices, cases and useful tools for a more effective development of healthcare systems across the EU**.

In order to ensure long-term sustainability and further developments, facilitating dialogues and knowledge transfer by **maintaining communication channels** (SEPEN website, SEPEN online forum on the EU HPP) and supporting **follow-up publications** is recommended. Utilising social media campaigns can be an effective tool for awareness raising about the importance of HWF planning. All methods used in SEPEN proved to be effective tools for knowledge transfer and initiating dialogues between the key actors of this field. Therefore, the support of events (webinars, workshops, conferences, policy dialogues) discussing HWF planning and policies, while facilitating interdisciplinary co-creation and sustaining the interest tailored to diverse target audiences/country clusters are highly recommended.

Maintain evidence and data

As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, scaling up HWF capacities to respond more effectively to system challenges is of outmost importance, however, this capacity has to be properly planned and forecasted. The HWF expert community needs **latest evidence to analyse** key themes and to conclude key patterns and trends for further **policy developments**. The continuous updating of the results of the SEPEN mapping study can support the various comparison of policy options across the EU (e.g. ways to tackle misdistribution and misalignments). Maintaining the online HWF planning and policy repository on the long-term can serve the expert community in HWF planning at international, national and regional level of HWF policies.

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