Employment and industrial relations in the health care sector

Executive summary

Introduction

The health care sector is of increasing socio-economic significance in the context of Europe’s ageing population. Demand for care workers and staff shortages are expected to grow, partly due to difficult working conditions and relatively low pay. This situation has already led to significant workforce mobility within and outside the EU, and could serve to exacerbate skills shortages in the future. Social partner organisations have an important role to play in shaping the attractiveness of the health care sector. But in many cases they do so within the constraints of public (or private) sector budgets, as well as within the framework of existing collective bargaining and social dialogue arrangements.

The report assesses the contribution of employers and trade unions in ensuring recruitment and retention in this sector. It summarises the sector’s key employment, expenditure and health care policy trends, describing industrial relations within the sector and analysing social partner contributions to addressing the current challenges. The report is based on contributions from 26 national centres of the EIRO network.

Policy background

The European health care sector plays a critical role in the achievement of the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy by contributing to the overall health and well-being of the workforce and society as a whole. Trends towards an ageing population are not only impacting on health care employers in terms of the rising demand this places on service delivery, but also in the context of emerging labour market shortages resulting from declining birth rates. The rise in life expectancy, with individuals expecting to live at home longer, coupled with the increasing complexity of conditions arising with older age, requires health care workers both to work differently and update their skills and competencies more regularly. Alongside these changes, health care funding systems are coming under pressure due to increasingly tight budgets, particularly in the context of the economic crisis.

Low wages and difficult working conditions in the sector are important factors contributing to labour and skills shortages in many parts of the health care system. Research shows that pay levels in the health care and other care sectors are low compared with the national averages for jobs requiring a similar level of qualifications. Work organisation and work patterns are generally not seen to be conducive to encouraging recruitment and retention of workers in the sector, particularly considering the predominance of women working in health care. A perceived lack of career opportunities, often despite significant investment in initial training, and the high levels of pressure and risk factors at work also contribute to labour and skills shortages.

Key findings

Social partners both at European and national level have recognised that the attractiveness of the sector needs to be improved to ensure high quality care and medical treatment in the future. This is not only linked to wages and terms and conditions, but also the ability to continuously improve and enhance skills and to develop career opportunities.

Some of the industrial relations features of the sector contribute to the ability to improve employment conditions, while other factors seem to limit it. On the positive side, organisational density is relatively high (particularly in the public sector), as is coverage of collective agreements. The tradition and practice of
Policy pointers

- Action by social partners has contributed to improving many aspects of working in the health care sector in a number of countries. In other countries, however, opportunities to do so are severely constrained by public sector budgets or the increasing decentralisation or fragmentation of collective bargaining. Many of the agreements to improve wages and terms and conditions in the sector that are cited in the report were negotiated prior to the current economic crisis. It is clear that increasing budgetary stringency will make it more difficult to address some of the factors impacting on the attractiveness of the sector.

- Gender equality considerations are particularly relevant in a sector so heavily dominated by female employment. Some work has been done to increase equal opportunities (for example, through job evaluations) and to ease the reconciliation of work and family life, but this is perhaps not as much as might be required given the importance of these issues.

- Employers in several countries are increasingly recruiting from abroad to help address skills shortages. Research shows that some action has been taken to support the successful integration of migrant workers into the workforce and the community. But again this seems quite limited and more could be done both to manage the impact on skills shortages in the migrants’ home countries and to integrate migrant workers more fully.

- Unfortunately, the information currently available provides insufficient evidence of the impact of measures aimed at recruitment and retention in the sector and more research is required to evaluate the impact of such measures and share good practice.

- The European-level social dialogue has an important role to play in this process. The existing working group on recruitment, retention and skills development provides good opportunities to exchange such information and learn from best practice examples.

Further information

The report, Employment and industrial relations in the health care sector, is available online at http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/h1008022s/index.htm

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