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Workforce wellbeing in European Healthcare: Challenges and strategic actions based on a questionnaire-based study by the European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Dear Editor,

The European healthcare systems and workforce are under unprecedented strain, driven by a combination of crises, including trained staff shortages, increased pressure of work, mental health issues, economic challenges, forced migration, and other issues. A recent press release by the World Health Organization has considered the current healthcare workforce capacity in Europe a “ticking timebomb”. In addition, WHO Europe recognized that the challenges to mental health of the healthcare workers in Europe are unacceptable and called for urgent action [1].

The healthcare sector in Europe is facing an aging population, declining birth rates, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, financial constraints, staff shortages, increased litigation, and growing concerns over healthcare workers’ well-being. Nearly half of healthcare workers reported emotional exhaustion and work-related mental health problems [2]. This situation raises significant concerns about resilience and sustainability of healthcare services across Europe.

Key challenges

Staff shortages in O&G internationally and aging workforce

It has been estimated that within Europe, OB/GYN physician shortages will reach 17 % in 2030, 24 % in 2040, and rise to 31 % in 2050 [3]. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists estimated a shortage of up to 8800 obstetricians and gynaecologists (OB/GYNs) by 2020 and up to 22,000 by 2050 [4].

Mental health and burnout

The prevalence of burnout among postgraduate medical trainees varies widely from 3 % to 88 %, with 25 % of UK doctors and nearly 40 % of European healthcare workers meeting burnout criteria [5]. In only two EU countries, burnout is officially recognized as an occupational disease, underscoring the need for acknowledgment and preventive measures. Physicians experiencing higher levels of burnout demonstrate a negative correlation with satisfaction in both work-life balance and professional fulfillment.

Obstetricians and gynaecologists rank among the top medical specialties for the rate of professional burnout reported. When burnout is present, there is a significant impact on job satisfaction, reduced productivity, impact on the quality and safety of patient care, increased risk of medical errors, impaired interpersonal interactions, and intentions to leave medical practice. Career dissatisfaction, early retirement, and even regret surrounding the original choice of career are all common when burnout is present.

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Gender imbalances and bias

Currently, 75 % of O&G doctors in training are female, the highest of any specialty. This is of concern, as female physicians are more likely to opt for an early retirement due to a potential conflict in work-life balance. This imbalance could contribute to higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scores as well as depression, hence the need for gender-responsive policies.

Recognizing these challenges, the WHO (2022) [4] (2023) [5] has outlined critical strategies to improve workforce conditions and retain healthcare talent. In response to the above challenges, the European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (EBCOG) and the European Network of Trainees in Obstetrics and Gynaecology (ENTOG) have joined forces to investigate disparities across European healthcare systems, and potential associations between different factors such as healthcare systems, cultural backgrounds, and training experiences, which may be contributing towards current crisis in declining morale among the medical workforce.

A Delphi survey was developed in order to collect demographic information and aspects of professional practice in Obstetrics and Gynaecology medical workforce in Europe as well as quality of life, burnout, moral distress, by using validated instruments. The questionnaire was launched in May 2024. (<https://forms.gle/9mS1KqWbYHKYezWh8>).

A call for action

To address these challenges EBCOG and ENTOG are working in evaluating the emerging and alarming gaps and needs in line with the WHO’s Bucharest Declaration’s goals. We urge all organisations, national OBGYN societies and individual professionals to support our efforts to engage with our ongoing study. This would help draw scientifically sound results, and hopefully will lead to developing guidance for reforms in training, recruitment, retention and improved working conditions, essential to prevent a decline in both workforce stability, the wellbeing of our workforce and the quality of patient care.

CRediT authorship contribution statement


Sofia Tsiapakidou: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sambit Mukhopadhyay:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Frank Louwen:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Tahir Mahmood:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jure Klanjscek:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Stergios K. Doumouchtsis:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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