



ONLINE WORKSHOP

MENTAL HEALTH IN HEALTHCARE AND VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS



FEAM Forum Workshop on “Mental Health in healthcare and veterinary professionals”
26 October 2023 | 10.30 – 12.00 (CET)
SUMMARY REPORT

Background

Work stress refers to the harmful physical and emotional effects which occur when job requirements do not match workers' resources. This situation often leads to poor mental and physical health, affecting the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of an individual. Mental health is an integral part of health and nowadays, it represents a priority for the EU Commission, which has supported actions and projects over the past 25 years to improve people's mental health in the EU and beyond. In her 2022 State of the Union speech, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the Commission's intention to present "a new initiative on mental health" in 2023. More recently, on 7 June 2023, the Commission adopted the Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, which will help Member States and stakeholders to take swift action to deal with mental health challenges. While many countries have implemented measures to protect and care for people's mental health, the magnitude of the current challenges requires further action to prevent permanent consequences for society. A shift of prioritization towards prevention is now needed to tackle behavioral risk factors and social, environmental, and commercial determinants and to have more ambitious actions on health promotion and prevention of mental illness. In this context, the [FEAM European Biomedical Policy Forum](#) and the [Federation of Veterinarians of Europe \(FVE\)](#) co-organized a webinar to draw attention on the current mental health challenges, affecting specifically the healthcare and veterinary sectors in the EU. This webinar was a call – for EU institutions, EU Member States, health industry and other health stakeholders – for taking concrete measures to support mental health. In addition, the event represented an opportunity to gather experts from academia, research charities, industry, European and national trade associations and professional bodies, regulators, public health bodies, and patient and consumers groups, to share evidence and suggestions on the way the EU could promote good mental health and prevent mental ill-health.

Introduction

Nowadays, mental health is a recurring theme in the news, but it is important to recognise that mental health problems predate the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic accelerated the discussions and raised awareness, conditions such as depression and anxiety were already on the rise. *"The only thing worse than people talking about you is people not talking about you"*; this saying underlines the urgent need to have an open and honest conversation about mental health. The statistics are alarming. Currently, one in six people struggle with a mental disorder, and over the course of a lifetime, this number rises to one in four European citizens. This represents a significant proportion of the population who suffer, as do their families. Over the last decade, more than 500 000 people in Europe have lost their lives due to suicide, making it the leading cause of death for many young people. It is an issue that demands collective attention and action. Mental health problems do not affect all populations equally. Vulnerable groups have emerged, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic and these groups include children, adolescents, women, migrants, people of lower socio-economic status and, in particular, health and veterinary professionals. Burnout, increased suicide rates and mental health disorders were already prevalent among these professionals before the pandemic. In the following sections of this report, you will find an engaging and lively discussion with a panel of experts from a range of multidisciplinary fields. The report consists of two sessions, followed by a panel discussion with

five distinguished panelists. This report serves as an important starting point for addressing the critical issue of mental health in healthcare and veterinary professionals.

Mental health of healthcare and veterinary professionals: overall perspective

A powerful message emerged, addressing the prevalent mental health challenges within the healthcare and veterinary professions. It was underscored that these issues had been in existence before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the presentation, the audience learned about societal disparities across Europe, encompassing regional, social, gender, and age differences in mental health problems. One pivotal aspect brought to light was the substantial economic burden associated with these mental health issues, estimated at a staggering 600 billion per year, even prior to the pandemic. Multifaceted stressors faced by healthcare professionals can be categorized into psychological, organizational, and environmental factors. These stressors significantly impact healthcare performance and the overall well-being of those in the profession. The pandemic ushered in a new wave of challenges. Psychological stressors intensified due to the fear of infection and work-life imbalances. Organizational stress factors were exacerbated, leading to the postponement of treatment, mismanagement of chronic conditions, and the disruption of healthcare services. Healthcare workers' safety and the safety of their families are paramount concerns. The lack of information about infection risks, insufficient personal protective equipment, and evolving guidelines further complicated their circumstances, leading to physical symptoms, compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, moral distress, and even traumatic stress disorders. The prevalence of insomnia, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and post-traumatic symptoms among healthcare workers was another issue highlighted during the conversation. These symptoms often occurred concurrently, resulting in an overall decline in well-being. Importantly, it was stressed that mental health problems were not confined to any specific category of health professionals; nurses, doctors, veterinarians, and various other healthcare workers all face these challenges, which were magnified during the pandemic. A pressing issue to address is the concept of burnout, characterized by prolonged, unresolved stress at work due to an imbalance between job demands and available resources. It was revealed that burnout had led a significant proportion of healthcare workers to contemplate leaving their professions. The take home message is clear: the mental health needs of frontline healthcare workers must be addressed. This entails ensuring access to prevention, quality treatment, societal reintegration, and eliminating stigma. It also stressed the importance of providing psychological, social, and practical support, with the aim of fostering a positive work environment and maintaining long-term mental well-being. In the face of these complex challenges, concrete actions are urged to support the mental health of healthcare professionals.

Veterinary Mental Well-Being and Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness

Mental well-being is also a vital issue to face within the veterinary profession. FVE represents over 300,000 veterinarians in 38 European countries, divided into different sections. It was emphasized the importance of culture within the veterinary profession, with shared values that include an unwritten expectation that veterinarians should prioritize patient welfare above all else, sometimes placing unrealistic demands on these professionals. It highlighted the challenges

faced by veterinarians and the stressors inherent in their work environment, which often lead to burnout and mental health issues. The culture of the profession sometimes expects veterinarians to be superheroes, resilient and impervious to stress and fatigue, which can lead to mental wellbeing issues. Recent research conducted by the FVE, with two cross-sectional surveys in 2018 and 2022, gathered insights from over 26,000 participants. The findings revealed that self-reported stress levels in the profession remain consistently high. Notably, female veterinarians reported taking more sick leave than their male counterparts, and early career veterinarians experienced more stress than more senior professionals. The need to address diversity, equity and inclusion within the veterinary profession is an issue also highlighted due to the impacts on mental wellbeing. Culture, organisational structures, and policies have often been sources of stress and mental health challenges. A roadmap was developed outlining the importance of conducting research and understanding the challenges to accelerate and strengthen the focus on diversity and its impact on mental well-being. Emphasis was raised on the importance of implementing strategies to increase mental wellbeing and awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion, reaching all veterinarians at all stages of their careers. The discussion called attention on the need for openness to mental wellbeing and diversity issues within the veterinary profession. Attention to mental wellbeing has increased over the last decade, but it is vital to reach all veterinarians and focus on creating inclusive and supportive workplaces. Future research and the need for a universal scoring system were highlighted, along with the need for a cultural shift to ensure professionals can thrive. Creating a sustainable veterinary profession with a focus on mental wellbeing and diversity is a key element to address.

Panel Discussion

[EU Commission and Parliament's perspectives](#)

The EU Commission recognises the urgent challenges related to the shortage of health workers and their working conditions, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges, including workload and burnout, require immediate and collective action. The EU Commission has launched several initiatives to address these critical problems, focusing on medical deserts, retention policies, task shifting and health workforce planning. Efforts are underway to improve the data and evidence base for health workforce planning to ensure that health systems have the right workforce to deliver quality care. Improving skills is a top priority and the EU Commission is actively working with partners to develop a skills strategy for health professionals. This initiative covers the development of new skills, including digital and green skills, and supports health workers in adopting innovative tools to improve patient care and reduce administrative burdens. The Commission has also launched a Mental Health Initiative, recognising the mental health crisis and its impact. This initiative is in line with the objectives of the European Health Union and is one of the 20 flagship initiatives. Specific funding has been allocated to initiatives targeting health professionals, including a training programme and a survey focusing on the mental health of health professionals. In summary, the EU Commission recognises the importance of addressing the health workforce challenge and is committed to supporting Member States in addressing these critical shortages and ensuring that health professionals have the resources, skills and support they need to deliver effective care. Likewise, the EU Parliament recognizes the critical issue of mental health in the workplace. Disturbingly, the data from 2022 reveals that 27% of EU workers have reported experiencing work-related stress, depression, or anxiety over the previous year. This situation is particularly concerning given that nearly 60% of healthcare workers

experience low overall well-being, over 60% face insomnia or sleep disturbances, and more than 70% exhibit anxiety symptoms. The current system does not prioritize the mental health of the workforce, despite mental health conditions being listed as occupational diseases by the International Labor Organization. It is emphasizing the importance of addressing risk factors in the workplace, such as absenteeism, presenteeism, work-related stress, burnout, violence, bullying, sexual harassment, fatigue, and psychological burdens. Healthcare workers face additional risk factors, making it essential to include this context and data in European discussions. Responding to the call for action, the European Parliament initiated its own Mental Health Report, highlighting the insufficiency of flagship initiatives. The Parliament calls for further actions, including tools in member states dedicated to identifying and addressing the psychological needs of workers through occupational medicine, research on the impact of teleworking, the adoption of guidelines for people with mental health conditions, and a review of the European Framework Directive on safety and health at work. Crucially, the Parliament advocates for the inclusion of work-related mental health conditions like depression, burnout, anxiety, and stress in the 2022 Recommendation concerning the Schedule of Occupational Diseases. This is essential for member states to recognize the multifactorial consequences of the workplace environment, including psychological stress. Accessible mental health services, especially for healthcare workers, are crucial. The European Parliament's message is clear: without addressing the mental health of healthcare workers, it is impossible to ensure the health of the entire population. Investment in prevention and support for individuals with work-related mental health conditions is vital.

[The nursing perspective](#)

The [European Federation of Nurses Associations](#) (EFN) clearly stated that the Commission has undoubtedly undertaken numerous initiatives, but it is crucial to acknowledge that the situation is far more dire. Nurses are leaving the profession at an alarming rate, with a 30% attrition rate in 2023. This mass exodus of nurses is transforming the entire healthcare system in the EU into a medical desert. Nurses are not merely planning to leave; they have already departed. In addition, 20% of nursing students have discontinued their studies. The scale of this crisis necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of all actions taken by both the Commission and the WHO. The Commission can no longer hide behind the principle of subsidiarity. In all EU member states, a minimum of 10,000 nurses have already exited the profession, and the situation is even more dire in countries like the UK, where 50,000 nurses have left. The primary focus should be on cultivating a sustainable domestic nursing workforce and ensuring that nursing students remain in the field. To address this urgent issue, the EU Commission was asked to promptly allocate funding to support the nursing profession, ensuring that nurses remain in the workforce. The alternative is the impending closure of hospitals. It is imperative that action is taken immediately. This approach is critical to salvage the healthcare system.

[The "One Health" Concept](#)

The FVE emphasized how the issue is inherently linked to the "One Health" concept, with underlying causes that affect healthcare professionals collectively. The stressors involved can be categorized into specific groups. Firstly, there are stressors associated with the nature of the work. These encompass the demands of dealing with patients, managing complex cases, and expending both physical and emotional effort. Veterinarians and healthcare professionals frequently face the emotional toll of managing cases with unfavorable outcomes and the challenge of handling patient non-compliance. Additionally, there is the emotional burden of communicating

with patients' owners. Secondly, professional stressors are evident in interactions with colleagues. These may involve conflict resolution, navigating differences in professional opinions, effective communication with patients and families, addressing harassment cases, and managing competing professional interests. Thirdly, the work-life balance represents a significant source of stress. Extended working hours, emergency calls, and being on-call during unconventional times add to the complexities of a healthcare professional's daily life. Achieving a balance between professional demands and family life is especially challenging, with a notable impact on female professionals, contributing to their declining representation within the field. The support initiatives discussed in the preceding conversations are pivotal for addressing these stressors. Nevertheless, a strong focus on prevention is equally vital. Education, specifically multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary training, plays a key role in prevention. Collaborative training fosters a sense of shared experiences, reminding healthcare professionals that they are not isolated in their struggles. The collective perspective of different healthcare professionals, including veterinarians and medical doctors, is essential. It reinforces the understanding that these challenges extend beyond one particular group and are part of a broader healthcare landscape. As all these professionals are dedicated to the well-being of both human and animal health, they share a common commitment that ultimately serves the greater good of society.

[Patient safety and technological solutions](#)

From the medical device industry's point of view, the healthcare workforce crisis in Europe was emphasized. With an estimated shortage of approximately 1 million healthcare professionals, the situation has far-reaching consequences for both professionals and patients. Healthcare professionals are grappling with increased workloads, overtime, burnout, and mental health issues. Patients, on the other hand, are experiencing extended waiting times and delayed access to essential care, affecting early diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, patient safety is at risk due to the increased likelihood of errors by overburdened healthcare professionals. In response to this crisis, technology offers a potential solution, but the choice of technology is crucial. The ideal solution should meet five key requirements: Stress Reduction, Efficiency Enhancement, Error Minimization, Bureaucracy Reduction and Focused Automation. Digitalization and automation of the medication management process meet these requirements. This system automates non-clinical processes and integrates electronic systems for a closed-loop medication management approach, including electronic prescription, preparation, and administration, all tied to electronic health records. It introduces technologies like barcode readers to ensure accurate medication delivery and documentation. Despite the clear benefits of this technology, implementation in European hospitals is lacking, with barcode readers present in less than 30% of hospitals. This underscores the need for action from the European Union and member states to invest in digitalization and automation of medication management, with the goal of alleviating the healthcare workforce crisis in Europe. Additionally, the use of technology for screening programs, such as self-collection sampling in HPV testing for cervical cancer screenings can significantly reduce the workload on healthcare professionals, allowing patients to collect samples themselves and receive results more conveniently.

[Future actions and upcoming 2024 elections](#)

In response to the question on how the upcoming 2024 elections will influence the evolution of the health workforce agenda, the representative of the EU Commission acknowledged the need to reassess the approach and actions taken, by working jointly with stakeholders, as the principle of subsidiarity is a key consideration. The EU Commission representative also noted the positive

outlook for the health workforce agenda, with various stakeholders showing increased interest and responsibility for the issue. EU funds, such as the Recovery and Resilience Fund, are available for Member States to invest in health workforce reforms and working conditions in a collaborative manner. However, it is not possible to specifically identify future actions and initiatives that will take part in the future political agenda, as it is premature at this stage. Positive developments in the mental health discourse and increased investment in mental health was announced. During the conversation, it was acknowledged the difficulties of negotiating with different political groups, but hope remains that the ongoing conversation on mental health would lead to better protection of health workers. Cautious optimism was expressed with regards to the future and the 2024 elections, particularly in the context of social issues and human rights, where mental health plays a crucial role.

[Developing a culture of protection and well-being for healthcare and veterinary professionals](#)

Addressing the issue of violence against healthcare professionals requires immediate action. In all member states, healthcare workers, particularly nurses, face alarming levels of violence, both physical and online harassment. It is crucial for the European Commission to develop a comprehensive program for member states to combat violence against healthcare professionals. Such violence contributes to burnout and can drive healthcare workers out of the profession, aggravating the workforce crisis. The stigmatization of mental health is a significant risk factor contributing to the high suicide rate. Young professionals entering the field with unrealistic expectations and the burden of work-family balance contribute to the problem. Mismatched expectations, long working hours, and coping with the pressures of the job all play a role in the mental health challenges. Initiatives to reduce stigma, promote mental health awareness, and provide support are essential to address this issue. To address suicidality and burnout among healthcare professionals, it is critical to create a supportive environment where seeking help is encouraged and destigmatized. Developing a culture where healthcare professionals prioritize self-care, pacing themselves, and asking for help when needed is crucial. The healthcare system and policies must facilitate easy access to mental health support for healthcare workers. Additionally, addressing violence against healthcare professionals, both physical and online, is essential to ensure their well-being and job satisfaction. Collaboration among healthcare workers, institutions, and policymakers is necessary to develop comprehensive solutions to these complex challenges.

Concluding remarks

It is evident from the discussion raised that a recent window of opportunity has opened in the realm of mental health. Professionals across various sectors should seize this moment and capitalize on the current heightened awareness and concern surrounding mental health issues. Windows of opportunity are not perennially open, and it is imperative that the community leverages this occasion to generate concrete solutions. The collective concern, interest, and preoccupation on mental health underscores that this is not merely a matter affecting professionals, but it is in fact, a challenge that impacts the entire population. Mental health issues have far-reaching implications, both in terms of prevalence and their economic and societal impacts. It is unquestionably a public health issue.

Additional material available

- [Agenda](#)
- [Full Recording of the Event](#)
- Slides:
[Mental health of healthcare and veterinary professionals](#)
[FVE activities on veterinary Mental Well-Being and Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness](#)

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Disclaimer: *the summary report is a neutral reflection of the discussion which has taken place, and it does not represent the views of any particular organization, supporting parties or individual. Those opinions may not be shared by all participating companies and attendees.*

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About FEAM, the Federation of European Academies of Medicine

FEAM is the European umbrella group of national Academies of Medicine, Pharmacy and Veterinary Science, or national Academies via their medical division. It brings together under one umbrella 23 National Academies representing thousands of the best scientists in Europe. FEAM's mission is to promote cooperation between National Academies of Medicine and Medical Sections of Academies of Sciences in Europe; to provide a platform to formulate their collective voice on matters concerning human and animal medicine, biomedical research, education, and health with a European dimension; and to extend to the European authorities the advisory role that they exercise in their own countries on these matters.

About the FEAM European Biomedical Policy Forum

The FEAM European Biomedical Policy Forum provides a platform for discussion on key policy issues for the biomedical community. The Forum is an initiative from the Federation of European Academies of Medicine (FEAM). It aims to bring together representatives from academia, research charities, industry, European and national trade associations and professional bodies, regulators, public health bodies, and patient and consumers groups. If you would like further information or becoming a partner, please contact elisa.corritore@feam.eu

About the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE)

The Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) is an umbrella organisation of 47 veterinary associations from 38 European countries, representing a total of around 300 000 veterinarians. FVE strives to enhance animal health, animal welfare, public health and protect the environment, by supporting veterinarians in delivering their professional responsibilities to the best possible standard and ensuring that this expertise is recognized and valued by society. Please find more information on www.fve.org or email to info@fve.org