

ENSURING THE NEED FOR NURSING PROFESSIONALS

5 September 2023

No ITE-2

SUMMARY

Relevance of the audit subject matter

Nursing is an integral part of healthcare, including health promotion, enhancement and preservation, prevention of diseases and risk factors, physical, mental and social care for healthy and sick persons. The Lithuanian Health Strategy 2014-2025 sets the target for the ratio of the number of nurses to doctors to be 2:1 by 2020, if not achieved¹ and, if the measures planned in the strategy are not implemented, this indicator will continue to decline: between 2022 and 2025, the value will decrease from 1.7 to 1.6. In 2019, Lithuania had 7.7 nurses per 1,000 inhabitants, which is below the EU average (8.4 nurses)². The shortage of healthcare professionals (including nursing) can be a challenge for a smooth implementation of restructuring³. A study by the Government's Center for Strategic Analysis shows⁴ that by 2030, the largest shortage of nurses in general care in the healthcare sector is projected to be EUR 3.2 thousand.

Objective and scope of preliminary study

The objective of the audit⁵ is to evaluate whether the need for nurses is duly justified and whether sufficient measures are being taken to prepare, attract and retain them in medical institutions.

¹ Assessment of the Lithuanian Health Strategy 2014-2025 carried out by the Institute of Hygiene in 2021.

² Strata Health Challenges Feasibility Study, 2022, page 45. Available at: <https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/2023%2001%2013%20LT2050%20Sveikatos%20i%C5%A1%C5%A1%C5%ABki%C5%B3%20sprendimo%20galimybi%C5%B3%20studija.pdf> (referred to on 2023-06-13).

³ Assessment of the National Audit Office "The Overview of the Health Care Network Restructuring", No VRE-1 of 30 January 2023.

⁴ STRATA. Update of Healthcare Professional Forecasts, 2021. Available at: <https://strata.gov.lt/images/tyrimai/2021-metai/20210719-sveikatos-specialistu-poreikis-rezultatu-suvestine.xlsx> (referred to on 2023-06-13).

⁵ Preliminary study is the stage of the performance audit process, which involves collecting and evaluating information on the area of activity in question in order to identify the problems it contains. Based on the results

Audited entity – the Ministry of Health, which formulates the state policy, organises, coordinates and controls its implementation and, in the cases provided for by law, implements it in the areas of governance assigned to the Minister of Health.

By raising the main questions of the preliminary study, we sought to assess:

- ✓ demand planning for the nursing professionals;
- ✓ organisation of training of nursing professionals;
- ✓ measures to attract and retain nursing professionals in medical institutions.

The period covered was 2020–2022. In some cases, we used data from previous and subsequent years to assess trends.

We collected information in municipalities, personal healthcare institutions, the Institute of Hygiene, the Government Strategic Analysis Centre, non-governmental organisations: the Lithuanian Association of Extended Nursing Practice, Lithuanian Association of Heads of Nurses, Lithuanian Society of Nurses and Intensive Care Nurses and Lithuanian Operational Nurses. We analysed foreign practices: WHO/OECD reports, audits carried out by EUROSAI members, the 2022 activity report of the European Federation of Nursing Associations, an overview of the International Council of Nurses, and Council of Europe recommendations. We conducted surveys: in all 60 municipalities (60 responses), all primary healthcare institutions (267 responses), students studying nursing (704 responses) and nursing professionals (2655 responses).

The preliminary study was carried out in accordance with international standards of supreme audit institutions. The methods of data collection and evaluation used in the preliminary study are described in more detail in Annex 2, 'Methods used for data collection and evaluation' (page 38).

Main results of preliminary study

In order to meet the demand of nursing professionals more effectively it is necessary to:

- ✓ improve demand planning processes for nursing professionals at the national and municipality levels;
- ✓ promote increased inter-institutional cooperation between the Ministry, municipalities, medical and educational institutions;
- ✓ implement a wider range of measures to attract and retain staff in the workplace.

of the preliminary study, the main study is carried out. However, under certain circumstances, in order to rationalise the use of audit resources, the main study may be omitted and the audit is completed with a preliminary study: e.g. the audited entity has taken action to address the problems, there have been changes in the audited area that may not result in further audit performance producing the required impact, etc. The preliminary study report indicates the problems identified without making recommendations to the audited entity.

Demand planning for nursing professionals needs improvements

The National Guidelines for Nursing Policy 2016–2025 provided for the development of a separate methodology for forecasting the need for nurses, but it was not developed. According to the Ministry⁶, it is included in the general model⁷ for forecasting the need for healthcare professionals prepared by the Government's Strategic Analysis Centre. The planning of the need for nursing professionals for 2020–2023 follows the developed model and updated 2021⁸ Government Strategic Analysis Centre forecast, which has weaknesses: there is no precise data on the number of posts occupied by nurses in public and private institutions, and there is no data on the needs of nurses in terms of qualifications (advanced nursing and nurse assistants) and specialisations. The transformation of the network and regional differences have so far not been assessed, according to the Ministry, they will be included in the updated forecast⁹. The Ministry does not have accurate data on the shortage of nursing professionals. The figures for the shortage of nurses reported by the Ministry and municipalities for 2022 differ 5 times and for nurse assistants 36 times. At the national level, there is no precise data on nursing professionals who have gone to work abroad. Therefore, it is not possible to reasonably identify a shortage of nursing professionals and ensure human resource planning based on relevant data (Chapter 1, pages 12–16).

The Ministry of Health participates in the HEROES joint project of 20 countries¹⁰ in order to improve forecasting and planning for the need for health professionals. According to the Ministry, the updated study of the Government's Strategic Analysis Centre in 2023 will include new study areas and programmes, the forecast will be presented, taking into account the strategic changes, the development of the network of medical institutions based on the regional cooperation model (Chapter 1, page 16).

In Lithuania, planning of the need for healthcare (nursing) professionals at municipal level is not systematic, as 68 % (41 out of 60) of Lithuania's municipalities and 25 % (200 out of 267) medical institutions do not plan the need for these professionals. There is a lack of inter-institutional cooperation with educational institutions that train nursing professionals: only 8 % of municipalities (5 out of 60) reported collaborating with them in 2022 to identify students from the region (Chapter 1, pages 16–17).

⁶ Information provided by e-mail on 8 April.

⁷ MOSTA. Medical staff forecasting model, July 2019.

⁸ STRATA. Update of health professionals forecasting. 2021.

⁹ STRATA. Adaptation of the model of forecasting the need for healthcare professionals in the context of the transformation of the network of personal healthcare institutions. 2022.

¹⁰ Available at: <https://healthworkforce.eu/> (referred to on 2023-06-13).

State funding for nursing studies is increasing and the number of enrollments is decreasing

In 2020-2023, the National Health Training Committee did not plan to order professionals according to specialisations and qualifications, i.e. master studies in nursing and studies in nursing assistants, although they should have done so (Chapter 2, pages 17-19).

Despite the growing demand for nurses, fewer students are actually admitted to state-funded nursing study programmes each year than those proposed for funding by the above-mentioned committee. Between 2020 and 2023, the Committee proposed the admission of 1860 people to state-funded nursing and midwifery studies and 1295, i.e. a 30 % decrease. The total number of enrolments increased, but the number of students enrolled in state-funded nursing study places funded by the Tier I decreased by 19 %. Between 2022 and 2023, 36 % of state-funded places were not filled (166 state-funded nursing and midwifery studies in local colleges and 43 universities). A 15 % decrease in the number of postgraduate graduates will result in a lower number of higher-skilled nurses who, with the latest knowledge, would be self-employed, leading and effectively addressing system problems (Chapter 2, pp. 19-21).

Despite the growing demand for nurses, fewer students are actually enrolled in state-funded nursing degree programmes each year than the Committee proposes to fund. For the period 2020-2023, the Committee had proposed to admit 1 860 people to state-funded nursing and midwifery studies, but admission was 1 295, a decrease of 30%. Overall enrolments increased, but there was a 19% decrease in the number of students enrolled in state-funded first cycle nursing courses. 36% of state-funded places were not filled in 2022-2023 (166 state-funded nursing and midwifery study places at colleges and 43 universities). A 15% decrease in master's enrolments, which will result in fewer higher-qualified nurses who would be able to apply the latest knowledge to work independently in medical institutions, to be leaders and to tackle systemic problems effectively (Chapter 2, pages 19-21).

Attraction and retention of nursing professionals in the workplace should be more effective

The Ministry of Health has developed a draft Attraction Plan 2022 to attract the health professionals most in need¹¹ (including nurses, and nursing assistants). The Ministry informed that the plan will be adopted by the end of 2023, as it is currently working with the European Commission's Directorate General for Support to Structural Reforms¹² and the project promoter they have hired, who has analysed the current situation, selected

¹¹ Government programmes 04-04-02 "Develop plans for legal, financial and communication measures to attract workers to health professions with the greatest shortage of staff (e.g. nurses, nurse assistants, etc.) (after consultation of the social partners)".

¹² DG REFORM

good practices from abroad and is currently working on a strategy for even distribution in the country (Chapter 3, page 22).

From 2020 to April 2023, no money has been allocated at the national level to attract and retain nursing professionals in healthcare institutions. Under the progress measure "Improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services"¹³, funding of EUR 14 million is foreseen for measures to attract professionals from the 2021-2027 Investment Programme for European Union Funds. The plan is to increase the efficiency of health human resources management; to develop and implement a model for empowering, attracting and retaining health professionals in the health institution; to raise the profile of the most in need specialisations and improve career guidance; and to apply other measures (Chapter 3, pp. 22-26).

40% of all municipalities and 44% (118 out of 267) of healthcare institutions surveyed implemented measures to attract and retain nursing professionals. Only 22% of municipalities and 30% of healthcare institutions provided funding for the measures. Only 19% of the healthcare institutions considered the municipality's measures to attract and retain nursing professionals to be adequate and sufficient (Chapter 3, pages 26-28).

87% of all municipalities, 76% (203 out of 267) of healthcare institutions and 91% (2,408 out of 2,655) of nursing professionals identified low pay as one of the main reasons for the shortage of these professionals. The average salary of a full-time nurse in 2022 was below the national average (EUR 1 789) in regional, district, hospitals for nursing and palliative care, primary healthcare centres and private healthcare institutions, and in the first quarter of 2023 it was below the national average (EUR 1 959.90) in the republican hospitals. Only 16% (426 out of 2 655) of nursing professionals consider nursing an attractive profession (Chapter 3, pages 28-30).

81% (567 out of 704) of nursing students surveyed, 70% of all municipalities, 74% (1961 out of 2,655) of employed nursing professionals and 50% (134 out of 267) of healthcare institutions indicated high workload as another reason for the shortage. The description of the procedure¹⁴ for determining the workload of nurses sets a recommended maximum number of patients per nurse, but there is no one tasked¹⁵ with assessing compliance. Only 28% (745 out of 2 655) of the nursing professionals surveyed consider that their workload is adequately regulated to ensure quality of service (Chapter 3, pages 30-33).

The Seimas plans to discuss¹⁶ in its autumn session draft amendments to the Law on the Health System and accompanying legislation, which propose to extend the responsibilities of nurses. These changes should improve access to primary healthcare services and reduce the administrative burden on family doctors. However, there is a lack of initiated action on the transfer of certain functions from nurses to nursing assistants, even though there are some functions for which nurses spend a great deal of time and have a level of competence that is much higher than that required for the work they do (Chapter 3, pp. 33-35).

¹³ Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/0431bbf0d83411ec8d9390588bf2de65/asr>, Annex 20, Measure 10 (referred to at 2023-06-13).

¹⁴ Approved by Decree No V-400 of the Minister of Health of 9 May 2012 (version of 1 November 2016).

¹⁵ Except in the case of an assessment by the VASPVT in the context of its supervision of compliance with the conditions for licensed activities of establishments (as provided for in the specific requirements of the service profiles).

¹⁶ https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=35403&p_k=1&p_t=285287, (referred to on 2023-06-13).

Reasons for completing the audit with a preliminary study

The Ministry plans to address the problem of attracting healthcare professionals, including nursing professionals, systematically. To this end, measures have been introduced and approved, which are already being developed. Once the measures have been implemented as planned, they should improve the working conditions of all healthcare and nursing professionals and make the profession more attractive. The Ministry of Health participates in the joint project HEROES16F¹⁷ of 20 countries to improve the forecasting and planning for the need for health professionals. Taking into account the developments in 2023 and the actions planned by the Ministry by the end of 2023, the audit is completed with a preliminary study. The insights presented in the report will be useful in implementing the measures planned by the Ministry of Health and in making decisions to improve the demand planning process.

¹⁷ Available at: <https://healthworkforce.eu/> (referred to on 2023-06-13).