

Mr. Olivér Várhelyi  
Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, European Commission  
Via email: cab-varhelyi-contact@ec.europa.eu

Brussels, 16 December 2024

Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

Firstly, we would like to extend our warmest congratulations on your recent appointment as European Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare.

Civil society and patient organisations are key stakeholders in effective policy discussions and we look forward to supporting you in your new role in defining a new way forward.

In this regard, the below listed civic and patient associations from 16 Member States, healthcare professionals' associations and MEPs, all united in protecting the health rights of European citizens, write to you to express serious concerns about the health workforce crisis in Europe, which demands immediate and comprehensive action from the highest levels of political leadership. With 15 million healthcare professionals constituting over 7% of the EU workforce and almost 4% of the EU population, their indispensable role in ensuring the well-being of our citizens and fostering trust in our healthcare systems cannot be overstated [1].

The European Year of Skills has brought attention to the significant labour and skills shortages within the health sector [2], as highlighted in Mario Draghi's EU Competitiveness report [3]. This was also underlined during the 18th European Patients' Rights Day titled "The key role of HCPs for a healthier Europe Combining the protection of patients' rights with skills shortage, medical desertification and job strain" [4], echoing long-standing warnings from the World Health Organization about the severe global shortage of health workers [5].

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing issues such as job strain, skill shortages, and medical desertification [6], while also introducing new challenges related to preparedness for future health threats [7]. The alarming trend of healthcare professions losing their appeal as lifelong careers further threatens the sustainability and resilience of our healthcare systems [8].

This crisis directly undermines the objectives of creating more resilient national health services and achieving the European Health Union, proclaimed in 2020 [9]. It jeopardises patients' rights, including access to care and the quality of healthcare services, as well as eroding the essential trust and dialogue between health professionals and the population [10].

In light of these urgent issues, we call upon the new EU Commission to prioritise the health workforce crisis by implementing concrete actions. Firstly, the new EU Commission must provide clear guidance and support to Member States to address the current skills gap among healthcare workers, particularly in immunisation [11]. Updating university curricula to include relevant training in immunisation and

communication skills is essential to address inequalities between Member States and ensure a consistent and efficient approach across Europe [12].

Furthermore, there is a critical need for better allocation of resources to support the continuous education and knowledge acquisition of healthcare professionals, particularly regarding the existence and use of available treatments (e.g. the one for COVID-19) [13]. By ensuring that healthcare professionals are well-informed about the latest treatments and practices, we can enhance patient care, reduce severe symptoms, and alleviate the financial and operational burden on healthcare systems [14].

In addition, improving the communication skills of healthcare professionals is paramount to enhancing patient knowledge and trust in healthcare systems [15]. National governments must invest in comprehensive training programs to improve the ability of healthcare professionals to effectively communicate the importance of early symptom identification and other vital health information. This will help mitigate the spread of viruses and ensure that the public receives accurate and reliable health information [16].

The new EU Commission has a unique opportunity to address these pressing issues, not out of necessity as with the previous parliament, but by choice and proactive commitment. The health of European citizens and the working conditions of healthcare professionals deserve focused and sustained attention from those making decisions on behalf of the European people.

The representatives of the civic and patients' associations welcome the adoption of the recent Council Conclusions, supported by the Belgian Presidency, titled "***The Future of the European Health Union: a Europe that cares, prepares and protects***". These conclusions set out key areas of focus for EU health policy and underscore the need for the incoming Commission to **maintain health as a top priority in its next five-year mandate**. Addressing the health workforce crisis through investment, digital tools, knowledge sharing, EU-level cooperation, and appropriate regulatory frameworks is essential for the future of European healthcare [17].

We urge the new EU Commission and all the EU Institutions to take decisive action in supporting the health workforce, thereby safeguarding the health and well-being of all European citizens, by empowering healthcare professionals for everyone's protection.

This open letter has been drafted by Active Citizenship Network-Cittadinanzattiva [18] with the support of RPP Group [19] and the endorsement of the following subjects:

NATIONAL CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS and PATIENT ADVOCACY GROUPS:

1. Lower Austrian Patient and Nursing Advocacy - NÖ PPA (Austria)
2. Patients' Organizations With you (Bulgaria)
3. Association of Reproductive Health, Pregnancy and Childcare "Smile" (Bulgaria)
4. Alliance of Transplanted and Operated ATO "Future for All" (Bulgaria)
5. Association of Patients with Cardiovascular Diseases (Bulgaria)
6. The Innovations Institute Founders (Bulgaria)
7. Bulgarian Association for Patients' Defence (Bulgaria)
8. Cyprus Federation of Patient Associations - CyFPA – OSAK (Cyprus)
9. Croatian Association for Patients' rights - CAPR (Croatia)
10. International Council of The Patient Ombudsman (Croatia)

11. INDECOSA-CGT (France)
12. Institute of Research for Innovation and Development – IMKKA (Greece)
13. Prometheus - Hellenic Liver Patient Association (Greece)
14. Irish Patients' Association (Ireland)
15. Tribunale per i diritti del malato (Italy)
16. IMPACT 2040 (Latvia)
17. Talented Borders (Latvia)
18. National Patients' Organisation (Malta)
19. Malta Health Network (Malta)
20. EPECS (the Netherlands)
21. Institute for Patients' Rights and Health Education - IPPEZ (Poland)
22. Azorian Association of Chronic Pain Patients - ADDCA (Portugal)
23. Portuguese Health Literacy Association - SPLS (Portugal)
24. National Federation of Chronic Disease Associations - FENDOC (Portugal)
25. Coalition of Patients Organisation with Chronic Disease (Romania)
26. Kultlab Celje Society – DKC (Slovenia)
27. The Slovenian foodbank - SIBAHE (Slovenia)
28. Association for Justice and Control (Slovenia)
29. Universidad del Paciente y de la Familia (Spain)
30. The National Federation of Associations ALCER (Association for the Fight against Kidney Diseases) (Spain)

#### EUROPEAN UMBRELLA PATIENTS' ORGANIZATIONS:

1. European Liver Patients' Association – ELPA
2. Digestive Cancers Europe - DiCE
3. European Coalition for People living with Obesity – ECPO
4. European Association for Educational and Preventive Health in Epigenetics – AESEP
5. International Patient Organisation for Primary Immunodeficiencies – IPOPI

#### HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS' ASSOCIATIONS:

1. World Federation of Public Health Associations – WFPHA
2. European Specialist Nurses Organisation – ESNO
3. European Medical Association – EMA
4. European Union of Private Hospitals – UEHP
5. Federation of European Academies of Medicine – FEAM
6. European Scientific Working group on Influenza and other Respiratory Viruses – ESWI
7. European Geriatric Medicine Society – EuGMS

#### MEMBERS of the EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (MEPs):

1. MEP Ondřej Dostál (NA, Czechia)

2. MEP Tomislav Sokol (EPP, Croatia)
3. MEP András Kulja (EPP, Hungary)
4. MEP Brando Benifei (S&D, Italy)
5. MEP Loucas Fourlas (EPP, Cyprus)

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- [2] European Union “European Year of Skills”. [https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en)
- [3] “The future of European competitiveness” [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en)
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- [6] “Medical deserts are areas where population healthcare needs are unmet partially or totally due to lack of adequate access or improper quality of healthcare services caused by (i) insufficient human resources in health or (ii) facilities, (iii) long waiting times, (iv) disproportionate high costs of services or (v) other socio-cultural barrier”. [European Journal of Public Health](http://www.euro.who.int/en/press-room/news/2014/04/medical-deserts)
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- [19] <https://rpp-group.com/it/rpp-brussels/>