Health and care workers are the mainstays of high-quality, universal and needs-based health and long-term care. Due to the profound structural and demographic changes EU countries are facing, many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, these professions are particularly challenged. Long-term care facilities and hospitals frequently struggle to ensure sufficient staffing. The situation is expected to become more challenging as the number of people with (long-term) care needs in Germany is projected to rise to approximately 6.8 million by 2055 (26% increase since 2021). Without necessary reforms, e.g., in the field of inpatient care, we run the risk of getting caught in a downward spiral: lack of personnel, fewer cases treated and increasing waiting lists, financial constraints, further decrease in personnel. The same applies to working conditions: Understaffing leads to more stressful work environments for the remaining staff, thus leading to more employee attrition. Policy-makers therefore need to take further action to retain the skills base, boost recruitment and improve working conditions for the health and care workforce.

The work of professionals must be organised according to their skills and qualifications. Better dovetailing of ‘inpatient care’ and ‘outpatient care’ as well as ‘medical treatment’ and ‘long-term care’ sectors, e.g. by way of cross-sectoral healthcare facilities, are key, an aspect considered in the Federal Ministry of Health’s plans for hospital reform. These facilities will combine inpatient medical services with outpatient medical and nursing care.

In addition, the German Federal Government has taken numerous concerted measures to secure the continued availability of skilled staff in the health and care sector. In addition to promoting fair and ethical immigration of skilled staff, legal initiatives were implemented to ensure adequate remuneration and instruments for assessing staffing requirements for nursing staff. Digital innovations that ease the workload burden and improve the quality and efficiency of healthcare provision need to increasingly be integrated into this work. This issue is also stipulated in the Digitalisation Strategy for Health and Care. The collaboration of Member States within the European eHealth network and the establishment of the European Health Data Space also play a vital role.

The number of sick days in the nursing profession caused by physical strain and emotional stress has increased over recent years and represents an additional challenge for health and long-term care facilities. In response, the statutory health insurance funds support nursing staff and their employers by providing specific workplace health promotion services to strengthen employees’ resources and maintain their health.

An urgent question and societal challenge concerns us all: How can we continue to ensure high-quality, universal healthcare in view of current demographic developments? In this context, the EU plays an important role as a mediator which can establish and expand spaces for knowledge transfer and the sharing of ideas so that Member States can effectively learn from measures that were successfully implemented elsewhere.