THE POTENTIAL OF STATE-RUN CIVILIAN AND VOLUNTEER SERVICES TO ADDRESS LONG-TERM CARE SHORTAGES: A REPORT FROM SWITZERLAND

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Summary: Forthcoming demographic changes, where people will live longer and the population over 80 years will increase, will bring about staff shortages in long-term care. Against this imminent shortage, policymakers in Switzerland have proposed measures in four main areas: staff recruitment, education, staff retention and staff deployment. Yet, policymakers will need to consider all possible effective means to tackle this challenge. In certain European countries, such means include state-run civilian or volunteer services, which can ease the pressure on health care staff and thus increase the quality of nursing and long-term care.

Keywords: Demographic Change, Staff Shortages, Nursing and Long-term Care, Civilian Service, State-run Volunteer Service, Switzerland

Introduction

Demographic changes expected in the coming decades pose major challenges for European societies and policymakers. People in Europe are going to be older, more numerous and more diverse than previously. Key factors spurring the change are fertility rates that remain low, people living longer and healthier lives, migration to and within Europe, and the sizeable baby-boomer-generation reaching retirement age. An important demographic megatrend is thus the overall ageing population in Europe, the so-called “grey revolution”. This article will consider the case of Switzerland.

The “grey revolution” and demographic challenges

In Switzerland, the reference scenario is that the population aged 20 to 64 years will grow moderately from 5.1 million to 5.6 million between 2015 and 2045, whereas the population over 64 will grow more rapidly from 1.5 million to 2.7 million during that time. The share of the population aged over 64 will thus grow from 18% to 26.4%. This shift is forecast to be particularly intense between 2020 and 2035, when the bulk of the baby-boomer-generation retires.
The situation is even more poignant when the population over 80 years is considered. This group is projected to grow very rapidly, from 420,000 (in 2015) to 1.1 million (in 2045), such that by 2045, 39% of those over 65 will be 80 years or older.

This is how the grey revolution looks in Switzerland. The age pyramid shifts shape, such that the tip of the pyramid becomes broader and moves further up. The old-age dependency ratio will grow from 29.1 in 2015 (i.e. there are 29.1 people older than 65 years per 100 people aged between 25 and 64) to 48.1 in 2045. Other European countries face similar changes.

The challenges posed by an ageing population are numerous, and they concern different policy areas. Challenges include shrinking tax revenues, the stability and funding of social security and health care systems, a shortage of skilled workers and other disruptions to the labour market, more older people in need of nursing or long-term care, and adjustments in how people plan and live their (longer) lives. A key demographic challenge is workforce ageing and the influence it will have on the long-term care sector: demand for care is increasing, while the supply of nurses and carers will be decreasing.

Who is going to take care of older people in need of care?

European countries and policymakers face an important question when it comes to the growing number of people in their sunset years: how is the long-term care sector in Europe preparing for the grey revolution? Or, more to the point: who is going to take care of the increasing number of older people in need of care?

In Switzerland, the demand for care staff is already growing. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of people working as nurses or carers increased by 13.9%. During that same period, the number of people graduating with professional certificates in nursing and care also grew – by 31.3%. Even though the growth in graduates is laudable and the result of great efforts by the Swiss care sector, the overall result is sobering. Switzerland is currently training only about 56% of the professionals that it will need in nursing and long-term care every year over the two decades to come.

Trained nursing and care staff from European or other countries are compensating for the lack of home-grown professionals in Switzerland. Arguably, it would be very difficult for the Swiss health care system to function without the staff from abroad. They will continue to play an important role in the Swiss care sector in the years to come – be it in formal long-term care settings, as in nursing homes, or in more private, informal settings.

In some European countries, expanding the recruitment of nursing and care staff abroad is seen as a prime solution for labour shortages. This, however, may not be a particularly sustainable solution, since the situation in the care sectors of receiving countries can quickly become worse if the working conditions in sending countries improve and fewer care staff wish to find work abroad.

Solutions in Switzerland

Towards tackling these challenges, a national report on the supply of health care professionals was published in 2016 by influential Swiss health policymakers – the Swiss Conference of the Cantonal Ministers of Public Health (GDK) and the National Organisation of Swiss Health Professions (OdASante) – who proposed a mix of measures in four policy areas. The target is to provide for a sufficient number of trained staff in nursing and care in Switzerland. The various measures address different actors (Federal authorities, Cantonal authorities, organisations of health professions, educational institutions, health service providers and other employers etc.), depending on their responsibilities and expertise. The policy areas and main measures are: staff recruitment, education, staff retention and staff deployment.

1. Staff recruitment

In order to be sustainable, the Swiss care sector needs to be able to recruit nursing and long-term care staff, as far as possible, in Switzerland. The Swiss care sector thus needs enough people who are interested in working as a nurse or carer – these can be school-leavers or adults who want to change career. One way to increase the number of people interested is to increase the appeal of the professions in question. The national report suggests improving the marketing for jobs in nursing and care, for instance through better information about nursing and care work and by improving the image of jobs in the care sector.

Furthermore, people interested in working in the care sector could have access to open-house presentations, short internships and similar efforts so that they can understand what is involved in the different jobs. This is how people get inspired for working as nurses or carers. Furthermore, basic education programmes for assistant jobs in nursing and care could be as accessible as possible – i.e. with minimal formal requirements – and provide a perspective for a career in nursing and care. In Switzerland, the Red Cross offers such an educational programme for health care assistants.

2. Education

A further important factor for providing enough nursing and care professionals are the capacities of the education system. Thus, health care institutions in Switzerland have been obligated through service agreements with the Cantons or on a legal basis – to train more nurses and carers. This requires adequate funding and a favourable general policy framework.

* In Switzerland, health care institutions provide vocational training in certain nursing and care professions.
3. Staff retention

Once people are working, it is key to keep them in nursing and care, otherwise efforts in the area of recruitment and education are futile. The national report suggests that the care sector should therefore strive for favourable working conditions and adequate remuneration.

4. Staff deployment

To do a proper job requires adequate resources, skills and motivation. Staff should therefore be deployed in tasks they are trained and motivated for. To achieve this end, health and long-term care managers should assess tasks and plan workflows in order to deploy staff adequately. This contributes to job satisfaction and staff retention.

One such resource is service days spent in state-run civilian and volunteer services. State-run civilian and volunteer services support institutions working in the public interest that are in need of helping hands. These institutions and organisations can receive civilian service members and volunteers to support them in their tasks. Policy and decision-makers can plan and steer the resource of days spent in institutions working for the common good.

In Switzerland, the state-run civilian service (“Zivildienst”) provides additional helping hands in the form of civilian service members to support formal nursing and care staff. They are a precious contribution – one that might become indispensable during the decades to come. In 2016, Swiss civilian service members undertook a total of 1.7 million days of service. Three-quarters were performed in health care or in social institutions, such as hospitals, nursing homes or reception centres for asylum seekers. In light of the huge demand for nursing and long-term care, this is a modest contribution – but a valuable one.

Even though there are considerable differences between the diverse services in the various countries – regarding the number of days served, the age of those serving, or the image and agendas behind the services – they all provide state-sponsored opportunities for citizens to engage and support the common good. These days served by volunteers and civilian service members are a resource and asset that policymakers can take into account to tackle societal challenges. For instance, to help mitigate the staff shortage in nursing and long-term care.

What state-run civilian and volunteer services can do – and what they cannot

State-run civilian and volunteer services can provide untrained but motivated helping hands for the care sector. Policymakers can steer the number of days spent by volunteers or civilian service members in certain domains, for instance through image campaigns or special incentives. In Switzerland, civilian service members are required to spend a certain number of days in core areas with high priority, such as nursing or care. With such measures, Swiss authorities guarantee that the civilian service contributes to domains with particular needs.

It is important to note, however, that civilian service members or volunteers cannot substitute for trained nurses or carers. They can only assist or aid trained staff. As assistants, however, they can be very precious. For example, they might have the time to talk or take part in social activities with older people in a nursing home – time that professional staff might lack.

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An additional contribution: state-run civilian and volunteer services in Europe

The examples outlined above suggest that relevant stakeholders recognise the challenge of avoiding staff shortages in nursing and long-term care. Still, given the magnitude of the challenge, they should consider all possible effective means to avoid such shortages.

At the political level, the Swiss association of nurses (SBK) has recently launched an initiative to include the right to accessible, sufficient and good nursing and care in the Swiss constitution. Most prominently, the initiative demands a sufficient number of trained staff in nursing and care, as well as their deployment according to training and skills. The initiative puts the issue of staff shortages in nursing and care on the political agenda.

Similarly, other European countries have institutionalised state-sponsored volunteer services, such as the “Bundesfreiwilligendienst” in Germany, the “Service Civique” in France, the “Servizio Civile Nazionale” in Italy, or the “National Citizen Service” in the United Kingdom. At the European level, the so-called “Solidarity Corps” was initiated at the end of 2016, joining other programmes by the European Union to promote civic engagement, such as the European Voluntary Service.

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† See https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en
‡ See https://europa.eu/youth/get-involved/take-part/national-citizen-service
** See https://www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/national-citizen-service
¶ See https://www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/national-citizen-service
Importantly, however, the services need to be organised in such a way that they do not endanger jobs or put pressure on wages in the care sector. Otherwise, they will lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public and undermine achievements in other policy areas.

“provide untrained but motivated helping hands for the care sector”

Conclusion

As we have seen, the challenges posed by the grey revolution in Europe are formidable. It will bring about considerable social change to the European care sector during the decades to come. Countries need to undertake measures to face this challenge. In doing so, it will also be worthwhile to consider the resources of state-run civilian and volunteer services, and to deploy them where suitable. Research is needed regarding the impact of civilian and volunteer services in nursing and care of older people. Undoubtedly, such insights will enhance policy decisions to tackle the challenges of demographic change.

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Portugal: health system review

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Since the financial crisis, health sector reforms in Portugal have been guided by the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between the Portuguese Government and three international institutions (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) in exchange for a €78 billion loan. Measures were implemented to contain costs, improve efficiency and increase regulation. Nonetheless, financial sustainability of the Portuguese health system remains a challenge. Due to cuts in public workers’ salaries the increasing migration of health care workers risks negatively affecting the quality and accessibility of care. While several reforms are aimed at improving coordinated care and developing the use of Health Technology Assessment, there is still scope for increasing efficiency in the health system.