Workforce challenges in European dentistry: going beyond the numbers

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***About the CED: The Council of European Dentists (CED) is a European not-for-profit association which represents over 340,000 dentists across Europe. The association was established in 1961 and is now composed of 33 national dental associations from 31 European countries.***

The year 2024 marked increased discussions and actions around the topic of workforce challenges for healthcare professionals in the EU, against the backdrop of European Parliament elections and the establishment of a new College of European Commissioners. The need to address the underlying problems that contribute to workforce challenges has been highlighted on the agenda of the EU institutions. Examples in 2024 include the [*Council Conclusions on Future of the European Health Union: A Europe that cares, prepares and protects*](https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9900-2024-INIT/en/pdf), that underlined the exacerbated health workforce problems in the EU due to demographic challenges and uneven presence of healthcare professionals within and between countries.

It is expected that more action on addressing this topic will be prioritised at the EU level in the new mandate of the institutional leadership – for example through a future strategy on health workforce, as well as evaluation of some of the key EU legislative files that relate to workforce. **While the last few months have been transitional when it comes to EU leadership, the CED underlines that policy makers must place this issue on top of the agenda in their new mandates.** This is also one of our core priorities in the CED [2024 Manifesto](https://www.cedentists.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CED-Manifesto_Long-1.pdf), that we prepared in light of the new EU mandate of 2024- 2029.

In the case of dentistry, the CED has been actively calling for addressing workforce challenges, in fact starting years before the abovementioned EU institutional updates. Some of our core documents, adopted by our General Meeting include our [White Paper on Workforce Challenges](https://www.cedentists.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CED-White-Paper-on-workforce-challenges-.pdf) from 2022, as well as our [CED Position on the Dental Workforce](https://www.cedentists.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CED-Position-on-Dental-Workforce-.pdf) from 2023.

When it comes to this topic, it is easy to only focus on the concrete numbers of healthcare professionals - but it is a lot more nuanced than that. There are many factors affecting the planning and distribution of dental professionals between and within countries – examples include discrepancies in wages and opportunities or the rural versus urban divide. Dentists and other healthcare professionals are not just a dry statistic and resolving workforce challenges requires more than simple math and balancing the numbers:

* The **balance in the relationship between the dentist and the dental team members should be maintained**, with the dentist as the team leader. Task delegation and no substitution should be continuously encouraged, with the permanent supervision of the dentist.
* **National dental chambers and associations must have a strong role in the workforce decision-making and planning at country level,** especially considering the variations in challenges between and within Member States.
* **EU policymakers should also prioritise the update of the Annex V.3/5.3.1 of the Directive 2005/36/EC (Professional Qualifications Directive)** introducing competences. As a minimum, the update of the subjects listed would ensure more up-to-date relevance to current dental education.
* Mentioning education, it is also crucial to focus on progress in eHealth initiatives. This issue has two sides – it is **important to ensure that eHealth expertise and knowledge is incorporated in the dental curricula** and in continuous professional education. Secondly, EU legislation in the field of eHealth **must ensure digital progress while not overburdening already stretched dental practices with additional administrative and compliance requirements** – a time that should be spent tending to patients’ needs.
* **Workforce challenges for dentists are also dependent on external factors** – e.g. availability of medical devices. Some dental medical devices may become unavailable due to the burdensome re-certification processes under the Medical Device Regulation, ultimately placing the oral healthcare needs of patients in jeopardy. **Keeping such provenly safe, effective dental medical devices must become a core priority in the years to come.**
* Lastly, policy makers should prioritise **developing policies that support appropriate workload, continuing education, favoring retention of the dental workforce**. Focus should also be placed on **concrete incentives**, e.g., spouse career opportunities and children’s education, that favor retention of the healthcare workforce especially in relation to rural dentistry/dentistry in remote areas.