

MURCIA DECLARATION ON THE FUTURE OF GENERAL PRACTICE AND FAMILY MEDICINE IN EUROPEAN HEALTHCARE

We, the undersigned, declare our commitment to promoting and protecting the role of General Practitioners /Family Physicians (GP/FP) within Primary Healthcare, as the only way to achieve universal health coverage and ensure the sustainability of our healthcare systems. In the face of increased demand and workforce shortages, we recognize the crucial role of the first level of the system as the foundation of effective healthcare delivery. General Practitioners/Family Physicians are highly trained medical professionals who provide individualised patient-centred care over a patient's lifetime. Continuity of care is the cornerstone of the profession. We call for strengthened targeted investment in general practice and family medicine, and expanded access in underserved areas. Moreover, by adopting a One Health approach, we acknowledge the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. Together, we strive to create a healthier and more equitable future for all.

Medical Workforce

We recognize the pressing need to enhance health and care workforce planning and forecasting, particularly in relation to the recruitment and retention of GP/FPs in Europe. The shortage of these essential and cost-effective specialists (or specialist general practitioners) poses a significant challenge to the delivery of quality primary care services and ultimately the survival of healthcare systems in general. To address this issue, we advocate the adoption of comprehensive workforce strategies which encompass recruitment and retention incentives as well as professional development opportunities. By investing in the GP/FP's education, training, and Continuous Medical Education and Professional Development, a sustainable and well-equipped workforce capable of meeting the evolving healthcare needs of our population can be secured.

We insist that addressing the current workforce crisis requires active urgent measures to enhance the recruitment and retention of General Practitioners and Family Physicians. This involves ensuring fair and commensurate remuneration reflecting the responsibility of their work and the added value which they bring to their communities, the healthcare system, and our nations. To safeguard their own health and well-being and mitigate psychosocial risks, General Practitioners/Family Physicians need increased consultation time for patients. There must also be full recognition of the time spent on administrative tasks. Failure to establish optimum GP/FP-Population ratios is already leading to restriction of personal workloads by GP/FPs in some countries in the interests of patient safety.

Safety and Work Environment

Furthermore, we highlight the need for safe working conditions, with the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies against violence, harassment, discrimination, and mobbing in the workplace. Targeted policies must be urgently introduced addressing the specific vulnerabilities of staff members who are more exposed to such behaviours. Every Physician must receive support throughout investigations of patient complaints and be safeguarded from baseless, malicious, vexatious or discriminatory complaints.

To support a healthy work-life balance and family conciliation, flexible working arrangements must be offered. Gender-sensitive policies and gender equality must be recognized and demonstrated throughout healthcare systems, promoting positive working cultures and inclusive environments in General Practice/Family Medicine. Implementation of such comprehensive policies, will strengthen the workforce, ensure the well-being of physicians, and allow provision of exemplary care to our communities.

Training and Professional Development

To foster professional growth, it is essential that there are sufficient opportunities for career progression and continuous professional development for General Practitioners and Family Physicians. Additionally, the improvement of bilateral communication and collaboration with secondary healthcare will enhance the overall coordination and effectiveness of patient care.

We insist upon the establishment of a high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate training (PGT) system which allocates sufficient time for senior doctors to mentor and nurture the professional growth of trainees, and caution against forcing junior doctors into understaffed areas without proper supervision. Under-doctored regions must be made attractive with incentives for both senior and junior doctors while safeguarding training integrity. We recognize the significance of incentivizing trainees to settle in the areas they train and strongly oppose the establishment of forced liability contracts which restrict career choices. Furthermore, we insist on the alignment of postgraduate training programs with EU rules to ensure the mutual recognition of professional qualifications across borders.

Junior Doctors in the healthcare system

We highlight the exceptionally vulnerable position of junior doctors within healthcare systems and the alarming and unsafe reliance on overtime working, which directly contravenes the standards set out in the European Working Time Directive (EWTd). This precarious situation poses a significant threat to the well-being of junior doctors and compromises the delivery of optimal and safe patient care. Therefore, the full implementation of the EWTd in junior doctors' schedules must occur without delay, ensuring adherence to reasonable working hours and appropriate rest periods. Moreover, we call for the establishment of robust mandatory oversight mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance with EWTd regulations, safeguarding the physical and mental health of junior doctors while upholding the highest standards of patient care.

Digital Transformation

Face-to-face consultations remain the gold standard allowing for comprehensive patient assessments. Notwithstanding the future of healthcare will heavily rely on digital technologies, digital health literacy and digital competencies must be enhanced for all healthcare professionals in order to achieve such a future. Moreover, eHealth tools must support quality of care, be user-driven and built in cooperation between healthcare professionals, patients, and technology experts. There must be a focus on better interoperability to avoid adding additional burdens as the evidence demonstrates the higher risk of professional burnout and job dissatisfaction. Lastly, we call for a more unified approach to implementing digital health solutions. Even though we support current initiatives and efforts of EU institutions to introduce regulations for digital technologies, new digital requirements are expensive and must be adequately resourced and must not create further obstacles or compromise time for doctor-patient consultations.

Healthcare Consumerism & Over-Medicalization

General Practitioners/Family Physicians welcome research and developments that produces new medicines and devices that benefit our patients. However, we express deep concerns regarding the growing consumerism trend in healthcare which has led to the over-medicalization of society. This phenomenon jeopardizes quality care for an aging and more clinically complex population. The emphasis on unnecessary medical interventions not only strains healthcare resources but also poses risks to patients' well-being. Therefore, we advocate for a shift towards prioritizing health promotion, improving health literacy, quaternary prevention, and self-care practices. By addressing social determinants of health and empowering individuals and communities to take control of their own well-being, we can foster a society which is healthier, more resilient, and less reliant on excessive medicalization.

Recognition of General Practice as a European Specialty

Finally, we strongly advocate the urgent full recognition of the specialty of General Practice/Family Medicine specialty throughout the European Union by the listing of General Practice / Family Medicine as a specialty in Annex 5.1.3 of the European Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications. By valuing and supporting the development of General Practice/Family Medicine as a distinct discipline with parity of esteem with other specialties, we will strengthen General Practice/Family Medicine, improve health outcomes, and enhance the overall well-being of our communities.