1.M. Workshop: Protecting and preparing healthcare workers: what to learn from COVID-19 to strengthen resilience?

Organised by: EUPHA-HWR, European Observatory, WHO
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Background:
This workshop is dedicated to the WHO International Year of Health and Care Workers in 2021 in recognition of their commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first wave of the pandemic healthcare workers were lionised, yet societies’ and health policymakers’ appreciation of their new ‘heroes’ was decreasing when corona fatigue was increasing. Health systems and policymakers have not fully understood the new emergent threats during the COVID-19 pandemic. Health workforce protection and pandemic preparedness are not limited to individual healthcare workers, but strongly impact in health system resilience.

Objectives:
This workshop sets the focus on the protection and preparedness of healthcare workers for global public health emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of health workforce policy during COVID-19 and to highlight the need for a health system and governance approach. The following major questions will be addressed: How can the protection and pandemic preparedness of healthcare workers be improved? How can the capacities of the health workforce be used and governed more effectively during a pandemic? What policy priorities can be identified to support the health and wellbeing of healthcare workers and prevent infection and deaths, as well as post-COVID fatigue, burn-out and job leaves? How can we build back better and more equitable, including strengthening gender equality and establishing solidarity-based health workforce migration policy?

Results:
The workshop introduces novel results drawn from four European comparative studies. A number of important policy recommendations are emerging from the research, which include among others: (1) improve attention to the complex health and social needs of healthcare workers, (2) implement comprehensive surveillance and monitoring systems, (3) establish European health workforce governance to mitigate shortages and inequality between countries and globally, and (4) take action to implement gender equality policies and to better protect female healthcare workers.

Conclusions:
The workshop will stimulate critical debate and improve knowledge exchange across countries and between researchers. It will contribute to creating resilience of the health workforce and health systems and to build back better after COVID-19 in a fair and equitable manner.

Key messages:
- Health systems must be accountable for the protection and preparedness of healthcare workers.
- Action is needed to develop a health workforce surveillance system on national and EU level.