

**STRENGTHENING THE NURSING WORKFORCE IN THE EUROPEAN HEALTH UNION:
PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE, AUTONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE CARE SYSTEMS**

DECLARATION ON INTERNATIONAL NURSES DAY 2026

The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) is a confederation of more than 40 national and European trade union organisations from over 20 European countries, with a total of more than 6 million individual members. Founded in 1990, CESI is a recognised European sectoral social partner and advocates improved employment conditions for workers in Europe and a strong social dimension in the EU. CESI represents public and private sector workers, including from trade unions in the health care sector from across Europe.

Declaration of CESI's expert commission 'Healthcare Services' on the 2026 International Nurses' Day

This year's International Nurses' Day is an occasion to pay tribute to all nurses for their dedication, professionalism and humanity. Nurses are at the heart of healthcare. They care, they guide, they prevent, they reassure, and they often hold together services that are under growing pressure. Their contribution is essential not only to patients and families, but to the strength and resilience of our health care systems as a whole.

Today is therefore not only a moment of recognition, but also a moment of responsibility. As echoed in previous [calls](#) of CESI for actions and measures across Europe, health care systems are facing increasing and more complex care needs, consequences demographic change, workforce shortages, and serious difficulties in recruitment and retention. In this context, supporting nurses is not optional. It is a political, social and health care imperative.

Discussions to strengthen the nursing workforce in the European Health Union today comes at the right time. They rightly place emphasise needs for boosted professional competence, advanced nursing practices, enhanced professional autonomy and more sustainable care systems. These are not abstract concepts. They are practical conditions for quality care, patient safety, workforce retention and a stronger future for health care in Europe.

Europe must stop treating nurse understaffing as a temporary inconvenience and start addressing it as a structural threat to public health. CESI rightly calls for sustained investment in health care professionals and for better guidance on safe staffing ratios – concepts that must include aspects of fair pay, decent working conditions, mental health protection, investment in education, and a better recognition of nurses' expertise. The future of health care depends on moving from applause to action.

CESI supports calls for stronger European action on the current health workforce crisis, including through relevant EU instruments for enhanced professional qualifications, skills, upskilling and reskilling, quality training programmes for nurses and specialist nurses – as well as through broader initiatives that promote quality jobs and sustainable care systems. Professional autonomy, clear competences, recognition of specialisation and opportunities for advanced practice must be understood not as barriers but as part of the solution to current and future health care needs.

European institutions, Member States, social partners and health care stakeholders should:

- better recognise nurses as key actors in the design, delivery and governance of health care.
- improve staffing levels and working conditions to ensure safe and dignified care.
- support more education, training, upskilling and reskilling throughout nurses' careers.
- further promote professional autonomy and involvement in decision-making for health care staff in line with qualifications and responsibilities.
- better value advanced nursing practice and specialised competences as drivers of better health outcomes.
- strengthen social dialogue and the exchange of good practices in health care staffing and collective bargaining.
- place sustainable care systems and workforce wellbeing at the heart of the European Health Union.

On International Nurses Day 2026:

- CESI stands in solidarity with nurses and reaffirms its commitment to ensuring that their voices, expertise and rights are fully recognised. Supporting nurses means strengthening patient care, empowering communities and safeguarding the sustainability of public health systems. A strong nursing profession is vital to building a more resilient, fair and inclusive Europe.
- CESI stresses that supporting nurses is an investment in society as a whole. A sustainable European Health Union depends on a respected, well-supported and empowered nursing workforce. Nurses deserve not only gratitude, but also tangible and lasting commitment.