

OSH MANAGEMENT IN THE HUMAN HEALTH AND SOCIAL WORK ACTIVITIES SECTOR – WHAT ARE EUROPEAN WORKPLACES TELLING US?

Webinar, 4 May 2022

Introduction

The European human health and social work activities sector is key in terms of ensuring the health and wellbeing of Europe's citizens, including its workforce. It is one of the largest sectors in Europe, employing around 11% of workers in the EU according to 2020 figures from [Eurostat](#). While a significant proportion of workers in the sector are employed in hospitals, they also work in other workplaces, such as nursing and care homes, medical practices and other health-related activity areas, as well as in patients' own homes. Workers in this sector are exposed to a wide range of risks to their health and wellbeing, including biological risks, chemical risks, physical risks, ergonomic risks and psychosocial risks.

Given the importance of the sector and the specific occupational safety and health (OSH) risks that its workers face, in 2021 the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) carried out a follow-up sectoral study of the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks ([ESENER](#)). The main aims were to analyse the sector data from the three waves of the ESENER surveys (2009, 2014 and 2019) to gain an overview of trends over time in OSH management in general, and psychosocial risks in particular, as well as the main drivers and barriers to OSH management in the sector and worker participation in OSH.

With the aim to present the main findings of the study on the [human health and social work activities sector](#), EU-OSHA organised a webinar on 4 May 2022: 'OSH management in the Human health and social work – what are European workplaces telling us?'. Experts from EU-OSHA, European Commission representatives and EU sectoral social partners presented at the webinar, which gathered over 60 participants.

Welcome and opening, EU-OSHA

Mr William Cockburn, Interim Executive Director, EU-OSHA

- ESENER has been running for almost 15 years with the aim of getting data from workplaces on how OSH is being managed in practice. Three survey editions later, EU-OSHA is planning the fourth ESENER wave, to take place in 2024, and we still see this information as important as ever.
- The data collected has enabled us to carry out analyses on different topics, such as the importance of OSH management in micro and small enterprises, how they manage psychosocial risks and the importance of worker participation in the management of OSH. We have also looked at trends over time, now that we have several survey waves.
- We have also decided to focus on different sectors and the webinar today looks at the human health and social work activities sector, which has always been a priority for EU-OSHA. In the past, we have produced material focused on informing policy and research on the sector but also practical guidance for the workplaces. Nearly all risks are present in the health and care sectors, and in fact, EU-OSHA has also been focusing on this in our Healthy Workplaces Campaigns, such as the one on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), [Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load 2020-22](#), which is finishing this year. And again, this will be a

theme that we pick up in the next Healthy Workplaces Campaign, 2023-2025, that will look at digitalisation because it is a sector not only where all risks are present almost universally but also one that is undergoing significant changes in employment models, contracting approaches and the use of technology.

- Through all this we have worked very closely not only with national authorities, particularly through EU-OSHA's network of [National Focal Points](#), but also with the social partners. We are very pleased to see their participation here today and the interest in this project. We sincerely hope that this ESENER report will be useful in your discussions and in practice as well.

European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER), EU-OSHA

Xabier Irastorza, Project Manager, EU-OSHA

- ESENER provides data on how European workplaces manage OSH in practice. Carried out three times in five-year cycles (2009, 2014 and 2019), ESENER interviews over 45,000 workplaces across all activity sectors and business classes in more than 30 European countries. The target respondent is 'the person most knowledgeable on how health and safety is managed at the workplace'.
- The main findings are covered in the presentation. ESENER provides comparable information across countries, sectors and business size classes on the management of OSH, including psychosocial risks, the main drivers and barriers to managing OSH, and how workers are involved practically in the management of OSH.
- Following completion of the survey, EU-OSHA carries out a series of in-depth follow-up analyses on a variety of topics. By summer 2022 the reports of the three first projects are to be published:
 - Managing psychosocial risks in European micro and small enterprises: Qualitative evidence from ESENER 2019 — [overview report](#), [country reports](#), [summary report](#).
 - Human health and social work activities – evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) — [overview report](#), [summary report](#).
 - ESENER 2019 Overview report.
- Further sectoral reports on Education, Accommodation and food services, and Transportation and storage will be published in 2022 and 2023.
- All ESENER reports, including technical documents and national questionnaires, as well as a Data Visualisation tool translated into all languages covered in ESENER, are available at: <https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/esener/en>

Human health and social work activities, EU-OSHA

Ioannis Anyfantis and Xabier Irastorza, Project Managers, EU-OSHA

- The ESENER follow-up study on [Human health and social work activities](#) complements an in-depth statistical analysis of the sector findings across the three survey waves with a literature review and interviews with key sector informants, in order to take account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The sector has a solid basis of OSH prevention measures, particularly in the area of psychosocial risks, which it should build upon. In this sense, it is crucial to acknowledge psychosocial risks in the workplace and try to create an open culture in view of reducing stigma of mental health issues.
- Mechanisation and digitalisation have an important role in preventing ergonomic risks in the sector, but it is also important to raise awareness of any potentially negative impacts.
- The sector performs well in terms of providing training and awareness raising of OSH issues. This should be continued, particularly in non-residential care settings, where the environment is less controlled. This could be done via exchanges of good practice examples.
- The sector also performs well in terms of communication on OSH and involving employee representatives in

OSH discussions, which should also continue to be a focus.

- The impact of COVID-19 on the sector has been significant. At the same time, it could act as a catalyst to improve OSH, based on the increased sector profile and the strengthened links between the sector and public health policy

The discussion focused on the following topics:

- Regarding digitalisation, the [Federation of European Social Employers](#) reminded about the joint position paper prepared together with the European Federation of Public Service Unions ([EPSU](#)) on [Digitalisation in the social services sector](#).
- The perception of legislation as a difficulty and, particularly, the differences among countries, despite [Directive 89/391/EEC](#), the OSH 'Framework Directive'. Analyses of ESENER suggest that the perception of difficulty might be driven by recent changes in the legal framework rather than an actual difficulty per se. Other factors, such as different support structures by country, could help explain this perception.
- The impact of COVID-19 on the perception of psychosocial risks and how it has contributed to talking more openly about the topic. Awareness about mental health in general appears to have increased during the pandemic and since it has become more prominent, the stigma around it has probably decreased.
- The difficulty to manage psychosocial risks, which is particularly reported among those workplaces taking more actions to prevent and manage them, including the involvement of their workers. The main challenge reported is the difficulty to talk openly about the issue.
- The ways in which the improvement of OSH in the sector could potentially benefit the end users, patients. While ESENER as such cannot provide direct information on this, there was interest in the audience about the topic.

View from the European Commission

Maria Teresa Moitinho de Almeida, DG EMPL C.2 Health and Safety at Work

- The [EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027](#) is particularly ambitious in analysing and addressing the most significant challenges around OSH risks with specific actions. It provides the right context for EU policy action in this area, setting out a framework for action, cooperation and exchange of good practices to improve OSH.
- Successful implementation requires joint efforts of all relevant stakeholders at EU, national and company levels.
- The three cross-cutting key objectives of the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027 are:
 - anticipating and managing change in the new world of work brought by the green, digital and demographic transitions;
 - improving the prevention of work-related accidents and diseases, and striving towards a Vision Zero approach to work-related deaths; and
 - increasing preparedness for any potential future health crisis — in light of the lessons learned by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The pandemic itself has highlighted the importance of OSH in society, in order to keep open essential services, as well as the relevance of having close links and synergies with public health.
- Further to the adoption of the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, some Member States are already in the process of reviewing or planning to review their national OSH strategies in consultation with relevant stakeholders, in particular their national social partners.
- EU-OSHA plays a crucial role in contributing to an effective implementation of the EU Strategic Framework, for instance, by providing [scientific and technical data](#), coordinating the [Healthy Workplaces Campaigns](#) that address current OSH challenges, or making available very relevant support tools such as the Online interactive Risk Assessment ([OiRA](#)). The European Commission greatly appreciates the contribution of EU-

OSHA, as do all stakeholders in the field of OSH, who consider the work of EU-OSHA as instrumental for improving OSH in the EU.

- EU-OSHA is providing valuable information via the ESENER surveys, reporting on how European workplaces are managing OSH on a daily basis, which is very important information to support EU policy initiatives.
- The human health and social work activities sector is very important and we know how workers in the sector are exposed to a wide range of OSH risks. The [ESENER report](#) provides a comprehensive and relevant overview of such risks and of their management. Ergonomic and psychosocial risks rank high and it is very relevant that this report also addresses the impact of COVID-19.
- All these aspects are relevant in the context of the EU Strategic Framework, which attaches a particular importance to the health and care sector, also in the context of the impact of the pandemic. There are several ongoing initiatives in this respect:
 - The tripartite Advisory Committee for Safety and Health at Work is working on the preparation of an opinion regarding the [inclusion of COVID-19](#) in the European Commission recommendation on occupational diseases.
 - The EU Strategic Framework highlights the need to protect healthcare staff exposed to hazardous medicinal products as well as to other OSH risks. Both the Commission services and EU-OSHA have launched studies on this, which, along with dialogues with relevant stakeholders, have revealed the need for further training and guidance. Additionally, the recently adopted amendment of the [carcinogens, mutagens and now, reprotoxic substances directive](#) recognises explicitly such importance and indicates the preparation of the guidelines by the European Commission, which is currently underway.
- It is very welcomed that the ESENER report is addressing the key points regarding the main risk factors and OSH management in the sector, as well as the drivers and the barriers, along with some learning points because this certainly represents a very valuable contribution for the implementation of the EU Strategic Framework. We also note the impact of digitalisation in this sector because we know well it can also bring new risks but at the same time offers great opportunities to reduce certain existing risks. Of course, the report states very clearly the need to continuously address psychosocial risks and ergonomic risks.
- To conclude, ESENER surveys are very important for underpinning any decision-making and policy identification of needs, and the focus on the human health and social work activities sector is extremely relevant and timely.

View from the European sectoral social partners

Leonie Martin, HOSPEEM

Sylvain Renouvel, Federation of European Social Employers

Adam Rogalewski, EPSU

Leonie Martin, HOSPEEM

- HOSPEEM has discussed the findings of the ESENER report during their last General Assembly, especially those on ergonomic risks. The prevention of MSDs is a shared concern of social partners and investments are needed, not only on equipment but also on training. Staff turnover is also an issue, particularly when trained people are leaving. The point on investments is very important because not all Member States count on the same financial resources.
- HOSPEEM is an official campaign partner of EU-OSHA's [Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2020-2022 Lighten the Load](#) and, together with EPSU, they have committed to keeping MSDs high on the European and national agendas. In fact, HOSPEEM and EPSU are currently updating their existing framework of actions on recruitment and retention¹. They are continuing the discussion among European social partners to exchange

¹ Signed on 31 May 2022: <https://hospeem.org/our-newsletter/social-partners-in-hospital-and-healthcare-sign-framework-for-the-future-of-the-sector/>

good practices and strategies in this field, as well as on the relevance of the current regulatory framework on MSDs at European level.

- On psychosocial risks, and in line with the issues raised in the ESENER report, HOSPEEM and EPSU are carrying out a project across several sectors on preventing third-party violence.
- Everyone is very aware of the impact of COVID-19 but it is relevant to point out that staff shortages was already an issue in the sector that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Long-term solutions are required and this is why HOSPEEM is working closely with EPSU on a joint policy position.
- As far as biological risks are concerned, [Directive 2010/32/EU - prevention from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector](#) is regarded positively but it is unevenly implemented.
- On chemical risks, HOSPEEM is positive about the revised directive on carcinogens, mutagens and reprotoxic substances, as well as the inclusion of hazardous medicinal products. However, sector-specific guidance is needed.
- Digitalisation brings about benefits and an improved service provision, for instance, by enabling staff to have more time to meet patients, but robots and artificial intelligence will not be replacing people. It is also important to bear in mind the impact that digitalisation may have on work intensity and stress.
- The role of social partners in preventing these issues is key. Having specific regulation can be very important but when social partners work together and agree on measures that can be directly implemented, it is even more positive.

Sylvain Renouvel, Federation of European Social Employers

- As pointed out in the ESENER report, there is good awareness of OSH issues in the sector, which comes as no surprise because our organisations are aware of legal obligations. And particularly about the two main risks.
- Concerning ergonomics, the Federation of European Social Employers too is a campaign partner of the Healthy Workplaces Campaign Lighten the Load 2020-22. Lifting and handling people in the sector is prevalent and the main cause of MSDs, even though there are no European official statistics on this particular issue. However, in France MSDs represent more than 90% of occupational diseases that are recognised in social services each year.
- Psychosocial risks too are a main source of concern and they have increased with COVID-19 because people were afraid of getting sick and of passing it on to relatives and service beneficiaries. Further to the impact of the pandemic, the social services sector was not prepared to deal with it and the situation was even more complicated at the beginning of the pandemic when public authorities did not consider nursing homes and residential care for people with disabilities as a priority for the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE).
- The good management of OSH in the sector, especially involving workers, is a good and relevant point made by the ESENER report. At the same time, and as highlighted by Eurofound's [European Working Conditions Survey](#), workers in the sector report high shares of high work intensity, high social and emotional demands, low quality of health and a negative impact of work on their health.
- The social services sector has the tools but the results are not necessarily in line. As a matter of fact, in terms of workplace accidents, they resemble industrial sectors rather than service ones. There has been a significant lack of investment in the sector since the financial crisis of 2008. Budgets have been cut and the consequences have been felt during the pandemic, where workers were exhausted and looking for jobs in other sectors. The Federation of European Social Employers carried out a survey among its employers' network in early 2022 and it was clear that many workers were leaving the sector and not even going to work in hospitals, but leaving the human health and social work activities sector totally. This is a significant challenge for the sector, particularly in a context of an ageing population with increasing support needs.
- Funding is needed to retain staff and to improve working conditions. Thinking specifically about social services, it is composed by a broad range of providers of all sizes with very different situations in terms of human resources and OSH management, which is something that needs to be borne in mind.

- The ESENER report points at those organisations reporting that they have no health and safety risks. This is something found in small organisations in the social services sector. Many people, managers and workers too often regard the tasks carried out in social services as something all of us face in normal life. We take care of our children and of elder parents but when it is an occupation, it is something that needs to be addressed. Responsibility is on both sides, management as well as workers.
- There is a big effort to be made in view of improving working conditions in the social services sector and the shortage of staff could act as a catalyst for that improvement. This needs to be done jointly with the sectoral social partners providing awareness-raising tools and exchanging good practices.

Adam Rogalewski, EPSU

- EPSU represents 8 million workers across Europe. As highlighted in the previous presentations by HOSPEEM and the Federation of European Social Employers, their joint work on the human health and social work activities sector is very smooth. It is very important to highlight the work on hospitals and the healthcare sector on the one hand, and the work on social services on the other. The pandemic has shown that it is not only about health but that primary care is crucial. There was certainly a lack of PPE in social services at the beginning of the pandemic, as mentioned previously by Mr Renouvel.
- Echoed Ms Martin's comments on [Directive 2010/32/EU - prevention from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector](#) – it is regarded positively but its implementation is uneven. It is worth reminding that this directive is the result of an agreement between EPSU and HOSPEEM.
- It is important to bear in mind the funding issues in the sector and the links between health and social care.
- Trade unions are crucial in ensuring that OSH regulations are respected at the workplace. It is essential to protect collective bargaining and trade union rights in these sectors. In this sense, the abuse of care recipients and workers' rights at a multinational private care company was pointed out, as a reminder of the need for private care companies to respect OSH regulations.
- The ESENER report is very valuable and it has been circulated among EPSU members, as it will help them at the national level.
- MSDs and psychosocial risks are indeed very prevalent in the sector. In the case of the latter, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing problems, there are currently many workers suffering from post-traumatic stress. This links to what has been raised before about staff retention, which is certainly a challenge in the sector and, in turn, leads to increasing psychosocial issues. Stress levels and third-party violence may actually increase when there is a shortage of staff. This is worrying per se but also because psychosocial risks are related with MSDs.
- There is a [multi-sector framework agreement](#) on third-party violence and EPSU is currently involved in a project to identify new risks, mostly stemming from digitalisation and digital mobbing or bullying. However, the main concern remains stress.
- Regarding COVID-19, it is expected that it will be included in the recommendation on occupational diseases. But there needs to be work carried out on Long Covid too in terms of planning return to work and adjusting working hours.
- It is very important to include psychosocial risks in OSH management and to have workers involved. But it is not necessarily the same across all subsectors, as pointed out by Mr Renouvel before. And this is precisely why having the sectoral social partners together is very important to ensure the proper application of OSH regulations.
- Mental health needs to be properly addressed and more public funds are needed.
- Finally, regarding mainstreaming of OSH, the privileged situation of the EU and its legal framework could support OSH as an opportunity to improve working conditions in general. Further to the legal framework, from EPSU's perspective EU directives on psychosocial risks and on MSDs are needed.

The following points were raised in the discussion:

- It is very important to differentiate among the subsectors within human health and social work activities, also in terms of compliance with OSH regulations in the public and private sectors.
- An EU directive on psychosocial risks and more guidance on how to manage them would be very welcome. This would be particularly relevant for the human health and social work activities sector because psychosocial risks are receiving less attention than other risks, such as physical or chemical risks. They should all be at the same level.
- Social dialogue and collective bargaining are crucial towards ensuring adequate implementation of OSH legislation. This is why a dedicated sectoral social dialogue committee for the social care sector would be welcome and a request was sent to the European Commission by the Federation of European Social Employers and EPSU.

Psychosocial risks in health and long-term care sectors

Paula Franklin, European Trade Union Institute

- The presentation focused on the main findings of the project 'Work-related psychosocial risks in health and long-term care sectors: Sources, factors and prevention'.
- The project methodology involved a literature review, semi-structured online interviews with trade union officials in three countries (Germany, Spain and Sweden), and online focus groups to verify the findings.
- The ESENER report resonates well with the contextual factors of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) study, which point at an increasing demand for healthcare, a lack of staff, a devaluing of health and care work, and the privatisation and commercialisation of care. This context creates many of the sources from which psychosocial risks arise in these sectors. There is an element of inequality that cannot be disregarded as women make up the majority of the workforce, in certain occupations there is a high share of migrant workers, and protection is not the same across all workplaces and countries.
- There are eight sources of psychosocial risks identified in the literature review, plus violence and harassment:
 - High:
 - Work insecurity, working conditions insecurity, emotional demands, quantitative demands and work–family/life conflict.
 - Low:
 - Control over working conditions, social support, and recognition and rewards.
- The study goes on to identify the psychosocial risk factors linked to the sources and the preventive measures, making an emphasis on worker involvement and social dialogue.
- The key messages of the study are:
 - Negative impacts of psychosocial risks on workers' health are evident in the healthcare and long-term care sectors.
 - While the sectors, work contexts and job roles are diverse, there is convergence in terms of the sources, factors and health outcomes of psychosocial risks.
 - The discourse must shift from a focus on individual mental health to the prevention of work-related psychosocial risks. Based on the research, there is a need to develop further primary prevention measures. The current focus seems to be on individual-level poor mental health issues and, therefore, the related measures are about secondary prevention and mitigating the impact of the exposures to work-related psychosocial risks (e.g. therapy) rather than eliminating them at the source.

The discussion focused on the following:

- The publication of the ETUI report is planned around summer/early autumn 2022. Events will be organised and the report will be disseminated broadly.
- The cooperation between public health and OSH and adopting a collective rather than an individual perspective. This seems to be an issue across different types of risks in the healthcare sector. It is the case in terms of biological agents, as reported by EU-OSHA's study [Exposure to biological agents and related](#)

[health problems for healthcare workers](#), where one of the conclusions was, precisely, that there needs to be a better cooperation between public health and OSH actors to ensure that good OSH prevention is being put in place.

- Building on the previous point, work on chronic MSDs too suggests that often individual accommodations to get a worker back to the workplace do benefit the entire workforce. In fact, if workplaces get the prevention better in the first place, it then reduces the need for individual accommodations. By inference, it would be similar for psychosocial risks.
- The focus of the study on the three countries in particular — Germany, Spain and Sweden — is due to their different ways in organising their healthcare delivery systems as well as their collective bargaining structure.

EU-OSHA forthcoming plans

Lorenzo Munar, Project Manager, EU-OSHA

- The research project will focus on the human health and social work activities sector. It started in January 2022 and will last four years with an overall budget of slightly over €1 million. During the first year a scoping exercise is being carried out, involving exploratory research by the EU-OSHA team to identify projects and initiatives such as the ones presented in today's webinar.
- A series of meetings are being organised with key stakeholders, such as sectoral social partners, EU-OSHA Management Board members and academic experts, with the purpose of gathering information, identifying needs in terms of research knowledge and also with the idea to help in establishing priorities. The research project is to be defined by end-2022.
- It is planned to analyse available statistics on the sector, by complementing the ESENER data with the European Working Conditions Survey and the [EU Labour Force Survey](#). This work will not only be on the sector as a whole, but by subsector, to take proper account of the differences between activities, as discussed today. The idea is to have specific reports for specific activities.

Closing remarks

Malgorzata Milczarek, Interim Head of the Prevention and Research Unit, EU-OSHA

- Thanks very much for the presentations, questions and comments, and the views from the sectoral social partners and the European Commission. It was a very interesting webinar.
- In addition to what Lorenzo Munar presented about the forthcoming work of EU-OSHA on the sector, I want to highlight the Healthy Workplaces Campaign Lighten the Load 2020-22, which will be finishing in November 2022, with the summit in Bilbao, to which we are glad to invite you.
- We also want to mention our other OSH Overview, which will be focusing on psychosocial risks. The research within this activity has started in 2022 and, among other products, EU-OSHA will be developing two expert articles. The first one will be focusing on mental health and psychosocial risks in the healthcare sector. The other article will be focusing on third-party violence, including domestic violence. Although the latter will not be focusing as such on the healthcare sector, the topic of third-party violence is highly relevant for the sector, as was mentioned earlier. Both articles will be available in 2023.
- Once more, thanks to all speakers and participants and to the EU-OSHA colleagues, both in charge of the organisation and those who have participated.