

NURSES

Nurses are usually the most numerous health profession, greatly outnumbering physicians in most OECD countries. Nurses play a critical role in providing health care not only in traditional settings such as hospitals and long-term care institutions but increasingly in primary care (especially in offering care to the chronically ill) and in home care settings. However, there are concerns in many countries about shortages of nurses, and these concerns may well intensify in the future as the demand for nurses continues to increase and the ageing of the “baby-boom” generation precipitates a wave of retirements among nurses. These concerns have prompted actions in many countries to increase the training of new nurses combined with efforts to increase the retention of nurses in the profession.

Overview

On average across OECD countries, there were 8.4 nurses per 1 000 population in 2009. The number of nurses per capita was highest in several Nordic countries, with 14 to 15 nurses per 1 000 population. It was also high in Belgium, although the data relate to all nurses who are licensed to practice, resulting in a large overestimation. The number of nurses per capita in OECD countries was lowest in Chile (although the number is underestimated, because it only takes into account nurses working in the public sector), as well as in Turkey, Mexico and Greece. The number of nurses per capita was also low compared with the OECD average in major emerging economies, such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and China, where there were fewer than 1.5 nurses per 1 000 population in 2009. This ratio has however been growing quite rapidly in some of these countries in recent years.

The number of nurses per capita increased in almost all OECD countries over the past decade. Across OECD countries, the number of nurses per 1 000 population increased at an average rate of 1.8% per year between 2000 and 2009. Chile saw the largest increase in the number of nurses per 1 000 population among OECD countries in this time period, with an increase of 12% per year, although the number of nurses per capita remains very low. Portugal and Korea also had strong increases in the number of nurses. On the other hand, in Israel, the number of nurses per capita declined between 2000 and 2009. In Australia and the Netherlands, the number of nurses per capita declined between 2000 and 2007, but has risen since then.

In 2009, the nurse-to-doctor ratio ranged from five nurses per doctor in Ireland to less than one nurse per doctor in Chile, Greece and Turkey. The number of nurses per doctor is also relatively low in Italy, Mexico, Israel, Portugal and Spain. The average across OECD countries is just below three nurses per doctor, with most countries reporting between two to four nurses per doctor. In Greece and Italy, there is evidence of an over-supply of doctors and under-supply of nurses, resulting in an inefficient allocation of resources.

In response to shortages of doctors and to ensure proper access to care, some countries have in recent years developed more advanced roles for nurses. Evaluations of nurse practitioners from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom show that these advanced practice nurses can improve access to services and reduce waiting times, while delivering the same quality of care as doctors for a range of patients, including those with minor illnesses and those requiring routine follow-up. Most evaluations find a high patient satisfaction rate, while the impact on cost is either cost reducing or cost neutral.

Definition

The number of nurses includes all those employed in public and private settings providing services to patients (“practising”), including the self-employed. In those countries where there are different levels of nurses, the data include both “professional nurses” who have a higher level of education and perform higher level tasks and “associate professional nurses” who have a lower level of education but are nonetheless recognised and registered as nurses. Midwives and nursing aids who are not recognised as nurses should normally be excluded.

Comparability

In several countries (France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Turkey and the United States), the data include not only nurses providing direct care to patients, but also those working in the health sector as managers, educators, researchers, etc. Data for Belgium and Italy refer to all nurses who are licensed to practice (resulting in a large overestimation). Austria reports only nurses employed in hospitals. Chile includes only nurses working in the public sector.

About half of OECD countries include midwives because they are considered as a specialist nurse. Data for Germany does not include about 250 000 nurses (representing an additional 30% of nurses) who have three years of education and are providing services for the elderly.

Sources

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- WHO-Europe for Russian Federation, and national sources for other non-OECD countries.

Further information

Analytical publications

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Statistical publications

- OECD (2011), *Health at a Glance*, OECD Publishing.
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- OECD Health Statistics.

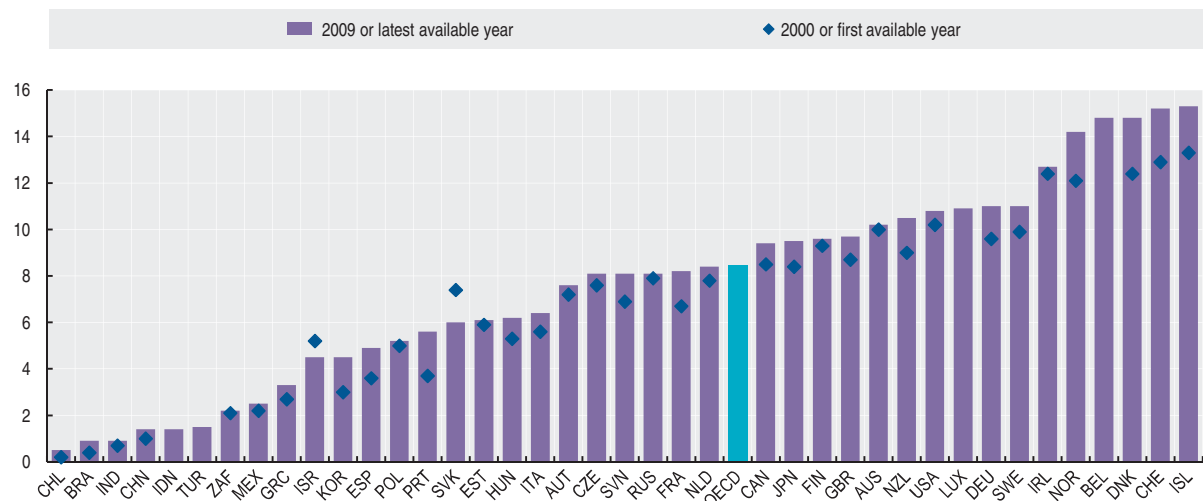
Websites

- OECD Health Data (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/health/healthdata.
- OECD Health at a Glance (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/health/healthataglance.



Practising nurses

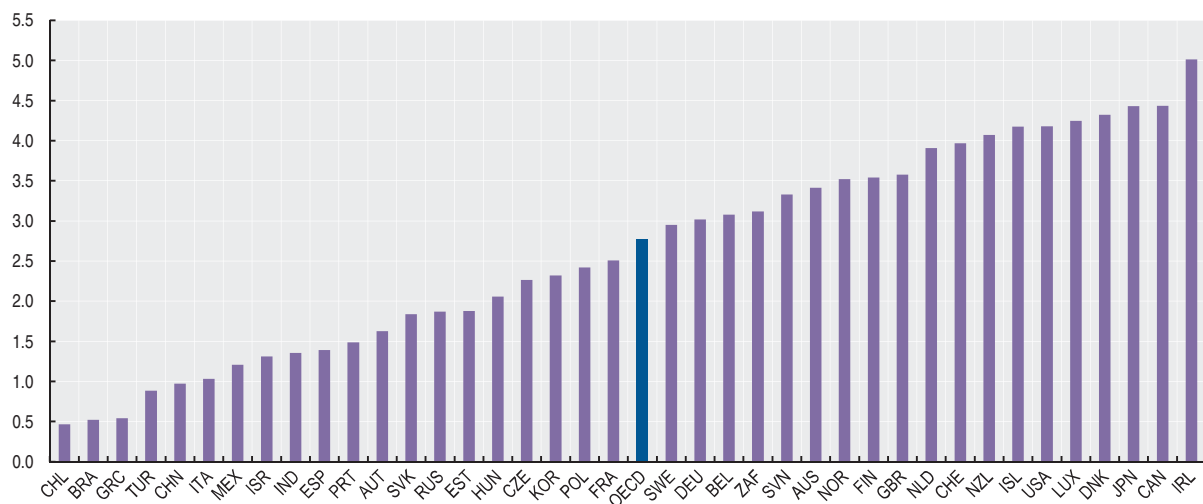
Per 1 000 inhabitants



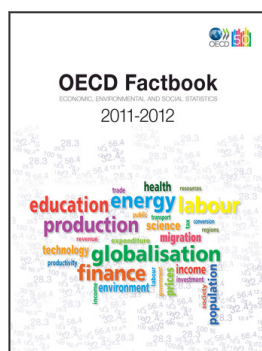
StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932508091>

Ratio of nurses to physicians

2009 or latest available year



StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932508110>



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