

3. HEALTH WORKFORCE

3.8. Practising 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 domiciliary 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 (OECD, 2008e).

This section presents data on the number of practising nurses, separating where applicable “professional nurses” from “associate professional nurses” (although these two categories of nurses often have different names in different countries). In 2007, there were over 30 nurses per 1 000 population in Norway, followed by Ireland with over 15, to a low of about two in Turkey and Mexico (Figure 3.8.1). The OECD average was 9.6 nurses per 1 000 population.

In Norway, more than half of nurses are “associate professionals” who have high-school education only and provide mainly social care. By contrast, in many other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, the vast majority of nurses are professional nurses. In some countries such as France, Portugal and Poland, the category of “associate professional nurses” does not exist, although professional nurses can be assisted by nursing aids who do not, however, have a formal recognition as a nurse.

The number of nurses per 1 000 population rose at an average rate of 1.4% per year between 2000 and 2007 across OECD countries (Figure 3.8.2). In Australia, the Netherlands and the Slovak Republic, the number of nurses per capita actually declined since 2000 (since 2004 in the case of the Netherlands). In Canada, following a decrease in the number of nurses per capita during the 1990s, the numbers have risen again over the past few years, following increased efforts to train more nurses (see Indicator 3.9 “Nursing graduates”).

The United States has the largest nurse workforce of all OECD countries, with close to 3 million “professional nurses” and more than 700 000 “associate professional

nurses”, but there is still a growing demand (Aiken and Cheung, 2008). Unless greater efforts are made to train more nurses, a shortage of one million professional nurses is projected in the United States by 2020 (HRSA, 2004). Some measures have already been taken to increase the number of graduates from nursing education programmes (see Indicator 3.9).

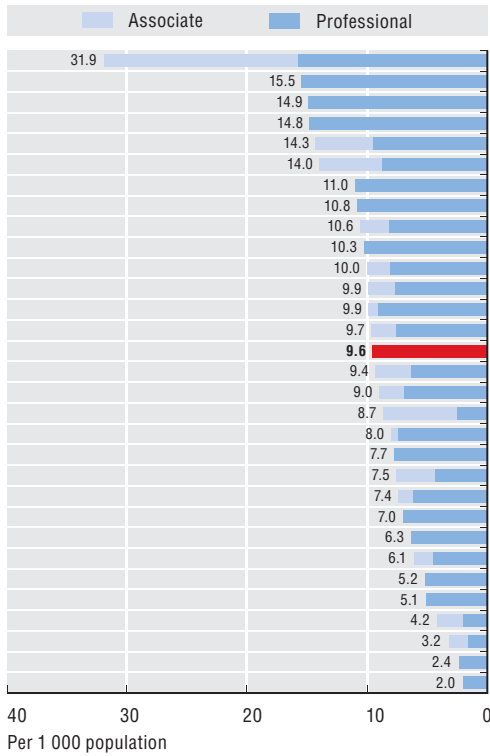
In 2007, the nurse-to-doctor ratio ranged from over five nurses per doctor in Norway and Ireland to under one nurse per doctor in Greece (Figure 3.8.3). The number of nurses per doctor is also relatively low in other southern European countries (Portugal, Italy and Spain). The average across OECD countries is just over 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 (OECD, 2009c; Chaloff, 2008).

Definition and deviations

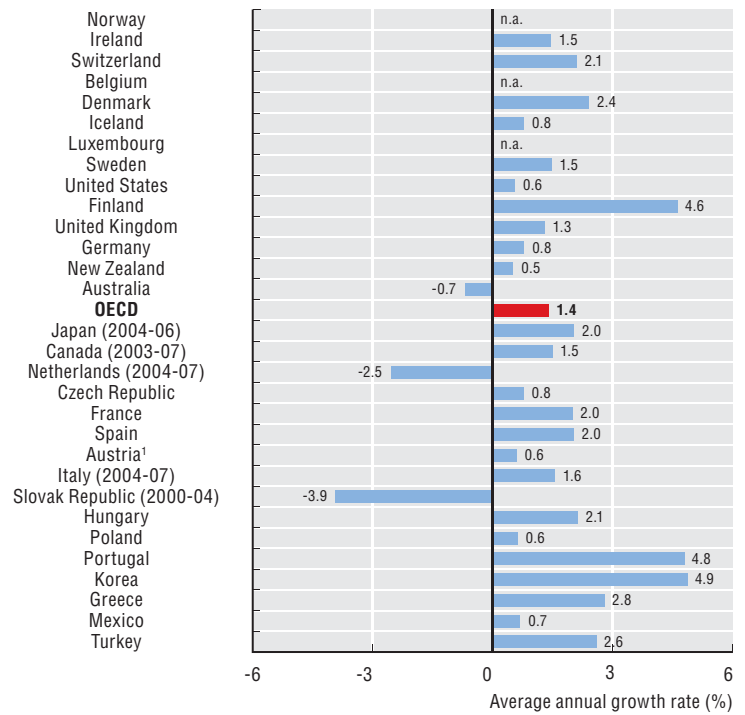
Practising nurses include nurses employed in all public and private settings, including the self-employed, who are providing services directly to patients. In most countries, the data include both “professional nurses” who have a higher level of education and perform higher level tasks and “associate professional nurses” who have a lower level of education but are nonetheless recognised and registered as nurses. Midwives, nursing aids who are not recognised as nurses, and nurses working in administration and research should normally be excluded.

However, about half of OECD countries include midwives because they are considered as a specialist nurse, and a number of countries include non-practising nurses working in administration and research (resulting in an over-estimation). Austria reports only nurses working in hospitals, resulting in an under-estimation. 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.

3.8.1 Practising nurses per 1 000 population, 2007 (or latest year available)

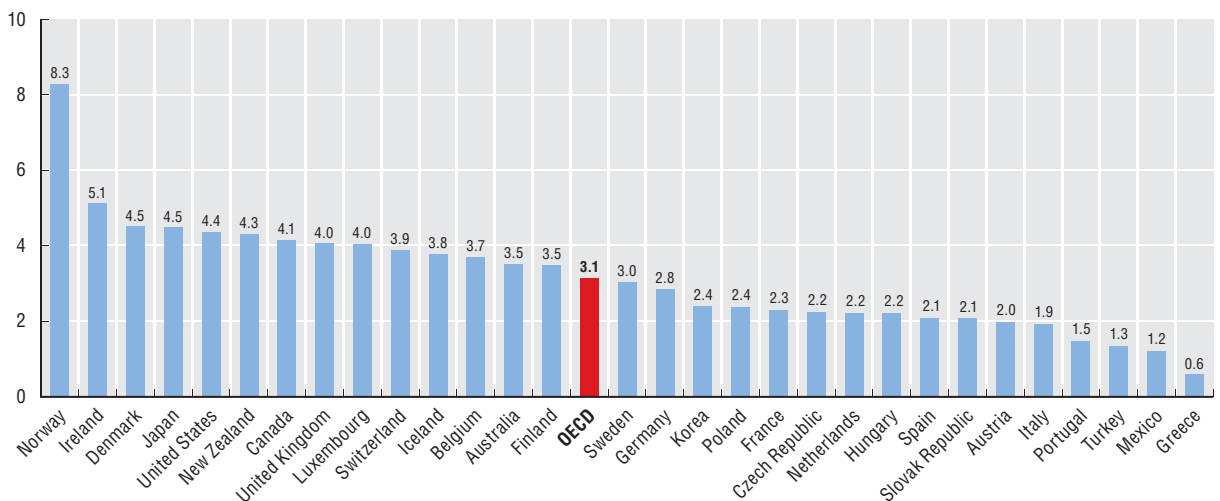


3.8.2 Change in the number of practising nurses per 1 000 population, 2000-07



1. Austria reports only nurses employed in hospitals.

3.8.3 Ratio of practising nurses to practising physicians, 2007 (or latest year available)



Source: OECD Health Data 2009.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/718182651388>



From:
Health at a Glance 2009
OECD Indicators

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/health_glance-2009-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2009), "Practising nurses", in *Health at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/health_glance-2009-31-en

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.