

# Finland to improve the quality of long-term care by increasing the number of nurses per patient

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*In order to guarantee the quality of long-term care, the Finnish government has decided to increase gradually the required number of nurses per patient in the Finnish long-term care system: from 0.5 as of 1 October 2020 to 0.7 by 1 April 2023.*



## Description

The Finnish long-term care (LTC) system is governed by legislation consisting of both mandatory and “less mandatory” rules. Some of the sections in the acts give care providers vast discretionary powers. Already in 2012, the Act on Supporting the Functional Capacity of the Older Population and on Social and Health Services for Older Persons (980/2012) asserted that there should be enough personnel to guarantee high-quality LTC. Discretion regarding the appropriate number of nurses per patient was left to the service providers and municipalities (LTC budgets in Finland are managed by the municipalities) – with poor results. The recommendation of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities was that the nurse-patient ratio should be 0.5, i.e. 5 nurses per 10 patients. However, this recommendation was not sufficiently binding and economic pressures on municipal budgets took precedence over recommendations that were not always followed.

In the winter and spring of 2019, the Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) detected severe shortcomings in the Finnish residential care system for older people: some of the privately-run institutions providing intensive residential care [tehostettu palveluasuminen] were found to have an insufficient number of nurses for proper care and were then shut down by Valvira.

Long-term residential care for the elderly became one of the main topics of the parliamentary elections in spring 2019.

In February 2020, Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s centre-left government passed a bill (4/2020) on the nurse-patient ratios in intensive residential care and long-term institutional care [pitkäaikainen laitoshoido] units. Since 1 October 2020, the recommended ratio of 0.5 has become legally binding: there need to be 5 nurses (including practical nurses, care and nursing assistants and physiotherapists) per 10 patients, in addition to non-nursing workers (e.g. those engaged in cleaning, cooking or laundering, who were sometimes counted as care personnel). This ratio should improve gradually so that from 1 April 2023, it should be at least 0.7.

The AVIs and Valvira supervise activities of the LTC units through licensing procedures, statistics and notifications of complaints.



## Outlook and commentary

The bill was heavily criticised by the opposition parties: it was seen to be excessively binding and to fail to consider varying circumstances in different LTC units. It was also criticised for creating significant extra costs with no corresponding improvements in the quality of care.

Private providers complain that they will not be compensated for the costs generated by implementation of the ratio imposed by the law. Care personnel and their employers disagree about the

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differences between nursing work and other duties not to be counted in the ratio (IS 6.11.2020).

Furthermore, there are different opinions as to the appropriate number of care personnel per patient. The Finnish Union of practical nurses (Super), for example, suggests a higher ratio of 0.8.

However, the most frequently discussed question is whether there are enough nurses to implement the required ratios. The reform is estimated to require at least 4,400 more nurses (including practical nurses), i.e. an increase of 15% compared to the situation in February 2020, and an additional cost of €238 million per year (Governmental Bill 4/2020).

There were concerns about whether there were sufficient carers (including practical nurses, care and nursing assistants and physiotherapists) in Finland even before the reform. In 2017, around 50,000 professionals were working in LTC, about 35,000 of whom worked in different forms of residential care, with the remaining 15,000 in home care (Vehko et al., 2017). In 2016, the number of LTC workers per 100 people aged 65 years or above was 7.6. This number was much higher than the OECD average (4.9), but much lower than that of neighbouring Nordic countries (Norway 12.7 and Sweden 12.4; OECD, 2019).

The government's decision to increase the staff-patient ratio to 0.7 will make this lack of personnel more serious. One obstacle to recruiting more employees is the relatively low pay in this sector in relation to its heavy workload. In addition, the number of applicants to nursing schools has declined in recent years while, at the same time, a vast number of nurses are about to retire or change jobs (STT 2019, Yle 5.2. and 7.2.2020).

Also the overall well-being of LTC employees has been under discussion. There are concerns about whether they will be able to carry on until their own retirement (Vehko et al., 2017). The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health has started a programme [*Hyvä veto*] looking at both the needs of clients and ways to improve working conditions of health workers.

During the last 15 years, Finnish governments have tried to bring in more labour from abroad, including LTC professionals. However, nurse recruitment from abroad is a complex and long process because both labour migration and the nursing profession are legally regulated in Finland. (Näre and Da Silva, 2020)

## Further reading

Governmental Bill on changing the Act on Supporting the Functional Capacity of the Older Population and on Social and Health Services for Older Persons 4/2020 (in Finnish).

Ilta-Sanommat (IS) 6.11.2020, Sitova hoitajamitoitus tuli – pettyneet hoitajat: "Mikään ei muuttunut" [*Binding carer-cared ratio was implemented – disappointed nurses: nothing changed*].

Näre, L. and Da Silva, T.C. (2020), The global bases of inequality regimes: The case of international nurse recruitment. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, E-pub ahead of print – 23.12.2020.

OECD (2019), [Long-term care workforce: caring for the ageing population with dignity](#) [retrieved 07.11.2020].

Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus ja Suomen kuntaliitto (2020), [Laatusuositus hyvän ikääntymisen turvaamiseksi ja palvelujen parantamiseksi 2020-2023](#) [*Quality recommendation to guarantee a good quality of life and improved services for older persons 2020-2023*]. Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus 2020:29 [retrieved 07.11.2020].

STT 29.6.2019, [Lähihoitajakoulutuksen suosio romahti – syytä etsitään työolosuhteista ja alan imagoista](#) [*Popularity of practical nurse education declining – are working conditions and the image of the field to blame?*] [retrieved 07.11.2020].

Vehko, T., Sinervo, T. & Josefsson, K. (2017), Henkilöstön hyvinvointi vanhuspalveluissa – kotihoidon kehitys huolestuttava. Tutkimuksesta tiiviisti. 11. kesäkuu 2017. THL, Helsinki.

Yle 5.2.2020, [Kevan toimitusjohtaja varoittaa jättimäisestä murroksesta hoiva-alan työvoimatarjonnassa tällä vuosikymmenellä](#) [*Public sector pension provider Keva's CEO warns about great changes in the availability of manpower in nursing in the coming decade*] [retrieved 07.11.2020].

Yle 7.2.2020, Hoitajaopintojen hakijamäärät laskivat tuhansilla kun ala polkee kriisistä toiseen. [*The number of applicants to nursing studies has declined by thousands while the field is undergoing recurrent crises*] [retrieved 07.11.2020].

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