

Finland: Follow-up on the increase in the nurse-client ratio in the long-term care system

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In order to guarantee the quality of long-term care, the centre-left government passed legislation on the nurse-client ratio. However, the reform has encountered severe problems caused by the shortage of nursing personnel needed to fulfil the quality standards required by the legislation.



Description

Due to severe shortcomings detected in the Finnish elderly care system, Prime Minister Sanna Marin's centre-left government passed a bill on the nurse-client ratio in long-term care (LTC). Since 1 October 2020, the formerly 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 (Kalliomaa-Puha, and Kangas, 2021).

Although the ratio has only been valid for a year, strong reservations have already been voiced concerning its effectiveness in ensuring good care for older individuals in LTC institutions. In some cases, the effects have in fact been the reverse. Care providers have not been able to hire enough personnel to meet the demands of the new ratio. In order to fulfil the new nurse-client ratios, they have been forced to reduce the provision of care. In other words, as a consequence of the new legislation, fewer places provide LTC even though the supply was already too low before the new law was passed.



Outlook and commentary

The intention of the government and the goal of the bill were to improve the quality of care and the lives of elderly people residing in LTC facilities.

During the parliamentary process, the governmental bill was heavily criticised. It was assessed as being excessively binding and too expensive, creating extra costs and failing to consider varying circumstances in LTC units. The most discussed concern, as to whether there are sufficient care personnel to meet the increased ratios, has proved to be justified.

In order to meet the legal client-staff ratio, care providers have been forced to cut the number of care places. Furthermore, there are now even fewer nursing homes meeting the ratio requirements than there were before adoption of the legislation. According to a study by the National Institute of Health and Welfare, 10% of units providing LTC do not meet the ratio, even though the state has provided municipalities with sufficient funds. Approximately 90% of the units have reported difficulties in recruiting the personnel they would need to fulfil the new ratio requirement. (THL 2021.)

Media outlets report that hundreds of applications for residence at nursing homes have been turned down (HS 14.9.2021). If older people cannot find places in LTC institutions, the demand shifts to home care services.

More problems can be expected in January 2022 when the staff-client ratio will have to rise to 0.6 and further to 0.7 in 2023. Thus, the most likely scenario is that an increasing number of LTC units will be unable to meet the requirements next year. (THL 2021.)

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has promised that when the implementation of the legislation on staff-client ratio in LTC institutions is completed, the second phase in the development of

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services for the elderly will begin, at which point the issue of staff involved in home care services will be incorporated into the political agenda. The ministry has planned to include the requirement for a sufficient number of nurses in home care in the legislation in relation to the implementation of care and service plans. In addition, more reliable ways of measuring the quality of care are needed. These measurements should include, for example, time spent on care (i.e. time spent implementing the care and service plan for the clients), indirect work, travel and necessary breaks. (Super 2020).

The problem is that the health condition and care needs of people receiving home care are different from those of clients in institutional care facilities. Thus, due to the heterogeneity of the clients, defining the proper staff-client ratio in home care will be a different, equally challenging task.

Services for people with disabilities create an additional challenge for public care services, as clients of disability services are also heterogeneous. Just as service needs vary greatly between young and old clients, clients with disabilities have diverse characteristics and care needs. For these reasons, individual consultation with the customer, assessment of the need for services, and regular updates of the care contract between the

client, municipal social worker, and care provider are necessary.

Fulfilling all these demands in a context of growing needs and a shrinking working-age population is a difficult task, resulting in a problem with availability of the care personnel required to meet all the demands set by the new legislation.

There are many obstacles to recruiting more staff to LTC institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of them. The pandemic has caused growing staffing needs in the primary healthcare sector, which has tried to recruit nurses. Another reason is the relatively low pay in relation to the heavy workload and working conditions in the LTC sector (see Kalliomaa-Puha and Kangas 2021). Furthermore, due to low fertility rates in the past 15 years, mortality will exceed births in most of Finland's municipalities. This phenomenon will make it exceedingly difficult to finance and organise LTC services falling within the responsibility of the municipalities (Kangas and Kalliomaa-Puha 2019). It remains to be seen to what extent the planned social and healthcare reform, meant to transfer care responsibilities from individual municipalities to greater entities (Hyvinvointialue; Well-being service counties), will solve these problems.

Further reading

HS [Helsingin Sanomat] (14.9.2021), "[Hoitajamitoitus ei yksin korjaa hoitokotien ongelmia](#)" [Staff-client ratio alone does not fix the problems of nursing homes]. [retrieved 15 October 2021]

Kalliomaa-Puha, L. and Kangas, O. (2021). Finland to improve the quality of long-term care by increasing the number of nurses per patient, ESPN Flash Report 2021/13, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

Kangas, O. and Kalliomaa-Puha, L. (2019). Can family policy save the welfare state? Some consequences of the steep decline in fertility in Finland, ESPN Flash Report 2019/58, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

Super [The Finnish Union for Practical Nurses] (2020), "[Hoitajamitoitus on tulossa lakiin](#)" [Staff-client measures will be included in the legislation]. [retrieved 18 October 2021]

THL [the National Institute for Health and Welfare] (2021), "Henkilömitoituksen seuranta" [Monitoring staff-client ratio]. [retrieved 7 December 2021].

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