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## Personnel problems

By Jennifer Rankin

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### **Commission says healthcare sector could face a massive shortage of workers.**

The European Union could face a shortfall of around one million healthcare workers by 2020, according to the European Commission.

In part this is a consequence of broader demographic trends - the healthcare professions are ageing along with the rest of society, and retiring workers are not always replaced. Migration is another cause, with English-speaking staff in particular lured to North America and Australasia by the promise of better wages and lifestyles.

Last December, the EU's 27 health ministers called on the Commission to draw up an action plan by 2012 to tackle the looming deficit in personnel. The ministers also promised to investigate how to improve working conditions and ensure decent opportunities for training and education.

Godfrey Perera, secretary-general of the European Hospital and Healthcare Employers' Association (Hospeem), argues that reasonable pay, competitive terms and conditions, safe workplaces and opportunities for training and development are all important.

"We are never going to be able to compete with the private sector on pay, but what we can do is make the terms and conditions attractive...maybe better than the private sector," he says.

### **Money talks**

Perhaps more problematic is the tension between the free movement of workers and governments' need to maintain services and get a return on funding expensive medical training.

Contacts in the Baltic countries have told Perera that they have lost 10% of their staff since joining the EU in 2004. Many of these workers have left their home countries for higher wages in western Europe, where the influx of well-educated, trained staff has been warmly welcomed.

Perera emphasises the importance of improving terms and conditions in home countries. "Pay is important...but it will take quite a long time for them to compete on pay. They have got to be able to make sure that the working conditions are attractive."

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