

Report on Medical Education and Healthcare Workforce in Bulgaria for ZEVA meeting, Dusseldorf, September 2023

Introduction:

Bulgaria has seen notable developments in its medical education and healthcare workforce in recent years. This report provides insights into various aspects of medical education, the healthcare workforce, and related challenges and opportunities in the country.

Accreditation of Medical Education:

The accreditation of medical education in Bulgaria is overseen by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA). NEAA ensures that medical schools meet quality standards and educational criteria. Bulgaria hosts several medical schools and faculties. The country has witnessed a steady increase in the number of medical students over the years, solidifying medicine as the most prestigious and competitive fields.

However, Bulgaria has faced challenges regarding physician shortages, particularly in certain specialties and regions. This deficit has led to discussions about the need to increase the number of healthcare professionals to meet the population's healthcare needs. In 2022, there were 45.9 physicians per 10,000 people, compared to 36.5 in 2005 and 41.6 per 10,000 in 2016. According to our data, by July 2023, there are 33,048 physicians in Bulgaria, but their median age is 53 years. While the percentage of young doctors has risen in recent years, only 12% of BG physicians are below the age of 30. 26% of Bulgarian physicians are between 51- 60 years old, while 38% are above the age of 60. Bulgaria continues to experience medical brain drain as more than 3000 physicians have left the country over the last 10 years. This means that most Bulgarian physicians are either nearing or in retirement age. The numbers are even more striking with regards to availability of nurses, according to data from our colleagues at the Bulgarian Association of Healthcare Professionals; there is a lack of nearly 30,000 nurses and more than 4,000 midwives.

National Health strategy will be presented at the National Assembly which foresees measures to tackle the deficit of health professionals, tie professional education to population needs, overcome health inequity, and obtain an optimal distribution of medical specialties through systemic investment in medical and professional education.

The ranking system of higher education institutions in Bulgaria for 2020 indicates a sustainable trend of increasing the number of students enrolled in fields preparing professionals for the healthcare sector. The data demonstrates that over the past 7 years, the number of medical students in Bulgaria has doubled from around 6,000 in 2013 to

nearly 12,500 in 2020. Overall, in all professional fields that prepare professionals for the healthcare sector, including fields like "Dentistry," "Pharmacy," "Healthcare Services," and "Public Health," over 28,000 students were enrolled in 2020 (almost 13% of all students in the country).

For the 2021/2022 academic year, 763 students were admitted to study medicine, and 784 – nursing. For the current 22/23 academic year, there are 769 places for medical students, and an increased number for nursing students compared to the previous year – 949. Due to the scarcity of nurses in our country, the Council of Ministers allocated an additional 50 places for nursing and 30 for physician assistants at the Medical University in Sofia.

Bulgaria is leader in the EU in terms of the proportion of international students studying medical specialties. 58.5% of the students studying "Medicine" in the country are foreigners.

Private Medical Schools:

There are no private medical schools in Bulgaria.

Chamber Involvement:

The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) plays a crucial role in advocating for medical professionals' interests and maintaining standards of medical education and practice in the country.

Role of CAM in Bulgaria:

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) has a presence in Bulgaria as a supplement to conventional medical practices. Some individuals in Bulgaria seek CAM therapies and treatments alongside traditional medical care. However, CAM is not typically included in the curriculum of physician specialty training in Bulgaria. The focus of medical education primarily revolves around conventional medical practices and evidence-based treatments.

The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) acknowledges the existence of CAM but emphasizes the importance of evidence-based medical practices. The BMA encourages medical professionals to base their treatments on scientific research and established medical knowledge. The BMA has not endorsed or promoted CAM as a standard medical practice. The association emphasizes that medical interventions should be supported by rigorous scientific research and adhere to established medical guidelines. The BMA focuses on promoting ethical and evidence-based medical practices within its membership. Bulgaria has regulations in place to prevent healthcare-related misinformation, including CAM. The Bulgarian National Health Act and other legal

frameworks govern healthcare information to ensure accuracy and evidence-based practices.

Opportunities and Challenges of New Medical Assistance Professions:

Bulgaria has been exploring opportunities to expand the scope of practice for various healthcare professionals, including nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, psychologists, and others. Curricula have been introduced, particularly those intended to assist physicians, such as physician assistants (since 2016) and paramedics (the first cohort graduated in 2021, and presently there are about 2000 trained paramedics). These new health professions typically involve assisting physicians in various aspects of patient care, including taking medical histories, performing certain medical procedures, providing patient education, and facilitating communication between patients and healthcare teams. The training for these roles is structured through educational programs that combine theoretical knowledge and practical clinical experience. The specifics may vary depending on the profession.

Curricula for these new health professions are often developed collaboratively by healthcare authorities, educational institutions, and professional associations to ensure that the training programs align with the needs of the healthcare system and maintain high standards of patient care. The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) is likely to have a role in discussions related to the development of these new medical assistance professions. While the BMA primarily represents physicians, it seeks to collaborate with other healthcare associations, regulatory bodies, and educational institutions to ensure that the introduction of these new professions aligns with established medical standards.

Conclusion:

Bulgaria has upheld the long tradition of quality medical education which translates in medicine remaining the most prestigious field of study. While challenges such as physician shortages persist, efforts to increase the number of medical students and explore new health professions offer promise for addressing these issues. The role of the Bulgarian Medical Association remains pivotal in advocating for high standards of medical practice and education in the country.

СЪЩИЯТ ТЕКСТ В ПОДТОЧКИ.

In Bulgaria:

1. **Accreditation Responsibility:** The accreditation of medical education in Bulgaria is overseen by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA). NEAA ensures that medical schools meet the necessary quality standards and educational criteria.
2. **Number of Medical Schools and Students:** Bulgaria has several medical schools and faculties. The exact number of medical students and medical schools may vary, but these institutions collectively train a significant number of medical students both Bulgarian and international. Medical education continues to be the most prestigious and competitive one.

Physician Shortage: Bulgaria has faced challenges with physician shortages, particularly in certain specialties and regions. This shortage has led to discussions about the need to increase the number of healthcare professionals to meet the population's healthcare needs. In 2022, there were 45.9 physicians per 10,000 people, compared to 36.5 in 2005 and 41.6 per 10,000 in 2016. According to our data, by July 2023, there are 33048 physicians in Bulgaria, however their median age is 53 years. While the percentage of young doctors has risen in recent years, only 12% of BG physicians are below the age of 30. 26% of Bulgarian physicians are between 51- 60 years old, while 38% are above the age of 60. Bulgaria continues to experience medical brain drain as more than 3000 physicians have left the country over the last 10 years.

This means that most Bulgarian physicians are either nearing or in retirement age. The numbers are even more striking with regards to availability of nurses, according to data of our colleagues at the Bulgarian association of healthcare professionals, there is a lack of nearly 30 000 nurses and more than 4000 midwives.

National Health strategy will be presented at the National Assembly which foresees measures to tackle the deficit of health professionals, tie professional education to population needs, overcome health inequity and obtain optimal distribution of medical specialties through systemic investment in medical and professional education.

Plan to Increase Medical Students: The ranking system of higher education institutions in Bulgaria for 2020 indicates a sustainable trend of increasing the number of students enrolled in fields preparing professionals for the healthcare sector. The data demonstrates that over the past 7 years, the number of medical students in Bulgaria has doubled from around 6,000 in 2013 to nearly 12,500 in 2020. This was highlighted during the presentation of the tenth edition of the system.

Overall, in all professional fields that prepare professionals for the healthcare sector, including fields like "Dentistry," "Pharmacy," "Healthcare Services," and "Public Health," over 28,000 students were enrolled in 2020 (almost 13% of all students in the country).

For the 2021/2022 academic year, 763 students were admitted to study medicine, and 784 – nursing. For the current 22/23 academic year, there are 769 places for medical students, and an increased number for nursing students compared to the previous year – 949. Due to the scarcity of nurses in our country, the Council of Ministers allocated additional 50 places for nursing and 30 for physicians assistants at the Medical University in Sofia.

According to the document, Bulgaria leads the entire EU in terms of the proportion of international students studying medical specialties. 58.5% of the students studying "Medicine" in the country are foreigners.

3. **Private Medical Schools:** There are no private medical schools in Bulgaria.
4. **Chamber Involvement:** The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) is actively engaged in discussions related to medical education, and quality assurance. The BMA plays a crucial role in advocating for the interests of medical professionals and maintaining the standards of medical education and practice in the country.

Role of CAM in Bulgaria: Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has a presence in Bulgaria as a supplement to conventional medical practices. Some individuals in Bulgaria seek CAM therapies and treatments alongside traditional medical care.

1. **Inclusion of CAM in Physician Specialty Training:** CAM is not typically included in the curriculum of physician specialty training in Bulgaria. The focus of medical education primarily revolves around conventional medical practices and evidence-based treatments.
2. **Chamber's Position on CAM:** The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) acknowledges the existence of CAM but emphasizes the importance of evidence-based medical practices. The BMA encourages medical professionals to base their treatments on scientific research and established medical knowledge.
3. **Handling of CAM by the Chamber:** The BMA has not endorsed or promoted CAM as a standard medical practice. The association emphasizes that medical interventions should be supported by rigorous scientific research and adhere to established medical guidelines. The BMA focuses on promoting ethical and evidence-based medical practices within its membership.
4. **System or Legal Framework for Preventing Misinformation:** Bulgaria has regulations in place to prevent misinformation related to medical treatments, including CAM. The Bulgarian National Health Act and other legal frameworks govern the practice of medicine and healthcare information. Regulatory bodies and authorities work to ensure that medical information provided to the public is accurate and evidence-based.

In Bulgaria:

1. **Expanding Scope of Practice for Healthcare Professionals:** Bulgaria has been exploring opportunities to expand the scope of practice for various healthcare professionals, including nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, psychologists, and others. This expansion aims to utilize their skills more effectively and address the growing healthcare needs.
2. **New Health Professions in Bulgaria:** There have been discussions about introducing new health professions in Bulgaria, particularly those intended to assist physicians. Examples include physician assistants (since 2016) and paramedics (first cohort graduated in 2021, presently there are about 2000 trained paramedics).
3. **Tasks and Training Structure:** The tasks of these new health professions typically involve assisting physicians in various aspects of patient care, including taking medical histories, performing certain medical procedures, providing patient education, and facilitating communication between patients and healthcare teams. The training for these roles is structured through educational programs that combine theoretical knowledge and practical clinical experience. The specifics may vary depending on the profession.
4. **Responsibility for Curricula:** The curricula for these new health professions are often developed in collaboration between relevant healthcare authorities, educational institutions,

and professional associations. The goal is to ensure that the training programs align with the needs of the healthcare system and maintain high standards of patient care.

5. **Involvement of the Chamber:** The Bulgarian Medical Association (BMA) is likely to have a role in discussions related to the development of these new medical assistance professions. While the BMA primarily represents physicians, it may collaborate with other healthcare associations, regulatory bodies, and educational institutions to ensure that the introduction of these new professions aligns with established medical standards.

Библиография

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