

WORKFORCE CRISIS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF PORTUGAL'S NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

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Introduction

Portugal's National Health Service (SNS) is facing converging pressures: physician shortages, burnout, declining career attractiveness and increasing reliance on private providers. Together, these pressures threaten continuity, equity and long-term sustainability.

Objective

To summarise the main factors affecting the sustainability of the Portuguese SNS and their impact on the medical workforce.

Methods

Narrative review of national and international reports, scientific literature and institutional data addressing workforce supply, burnout, healthcare access and health policy in Portugal.

Primary care access

A major gap in universal coverage [7]



Reduced continuity of care, greater use of emergency services and widening regional inequalities.

System-level findings

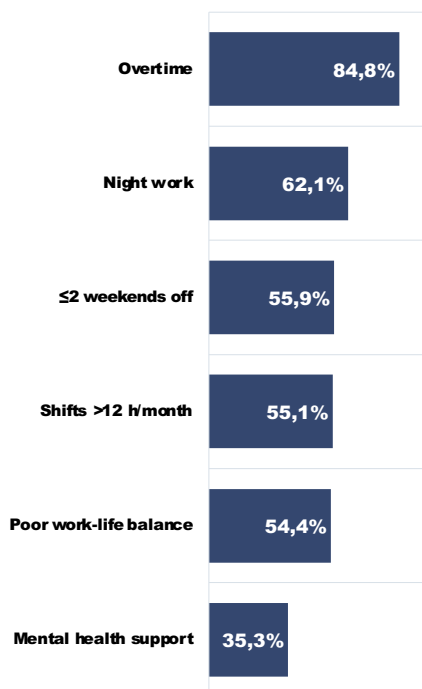
- Persistent physician shortages
- Dependence on overtime and temporary staffing
- Increasing private-sector reliance
- Unequal regional recruitment and retention
- Workforce outflow and ageing

Medical residents

Workload and wellbeing indicators

52.8 h/week

Average weekly workload among medical residents



High workloads, long shifts, limited recovery time and inadequate organisational support are structural drivers of burnout.

Why it matters

A reinforcing cycle

Shortages → workload → burnout → attrition → deeper shortages.

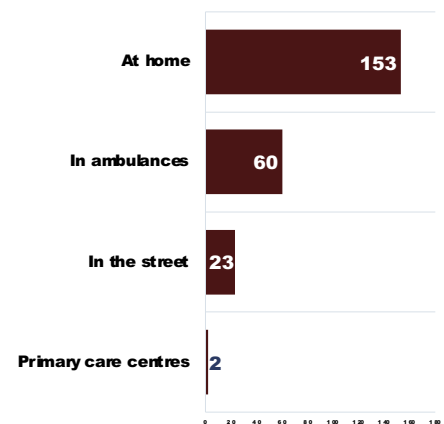
Doctors exposed to these conditions early in their careers are more likely to leave the SNS, move to the private sector or seek opportunities abroad. This weakens continuity of care and increases pressure on the remaining workforce.

Emergency services

Out-of-hospital births reported in 2025

238 births

occurred outside hospital settings in provisional 2025 data



Emergency department closures and staffing shortages, particularly in obstetrics and paediatrics, expose systemic fragility and patient-safety risks.

Conclusion

Portugal's SNS is at a critical juncture. Workforce shortages, burnout and policy misalignment threaten high-quality care and the sustainability of a universal public service.

Priority actions

1. Strengthen medical careers and remuneration
2. Improve schedules, supervision and working conditions
3. Implement long-term workforce planning and retention
4. Reinforce primary care and public-sector capacity
5. Protect universal and equitable access

Supporting doctors is essential to sustaining the SNS.

Selected references

1. ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT. Health at a Glance: Europe 2024. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024. 2. WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. Health and Care Workforce in Europe: Time to Act. Geneva: WHO, 2022. 3. ORDEM DOS MÉDICOS. Avaliação do burnout no internato médico português. Lisboa: Ordem dos Médicos, 2023. 4. EUROPEAN COMMISSION; OECD. Portugal: Country Health Profile 2023. Brussels: European Commission, 2023.