

Care work – working at the limit?

Working conditions in the care sector

The Stress Report Germany 2012 shows that high mental demands are placed on German employees. At the same time, however, some occupational groups are also subject to considerable physical demands. These include employees in care professions in hospitals, care homes and outpatient care – an occupation group that is becoming increasingly important due to demographic change. Data from the BIBB/BAuA 2012 Employment Survey is used to consider work-related physical, temporal and mental demands, as well as care workers' resources, stress levels and health complaints, and each of these aspects is compared with the average values for other employed persons.

Care and care workers are becoming more important

Demographic change not only means a significant increase in the proportion of older employees over the next few years. It also entails a growing need for care workers, whose average age is also increasing. Against this background, growing importance is attached to working capacity and employability in care professions. Indeed, there has been talk for some time of a growing lack of skilled workers in the care sector. These are good reasons for creating attractive working conditions – in order to bring in a new generation of workers and to retain existing personnel. But what exactly is the current situation in the care sector? To answer this question, data on the working conditions of nurses (n = 464; incl. nurses, paediatric nurses, midwives) and geriatric nurses (n = 282) is analysed and compared with that of other employed persons (n = 19,290).

Physical demands in care work

On average, care workers report physical stress such as “working while standing”, “lifting and carrying heavy loads” and “working in forced postures” considerably more often than other employed persons. This applies in particular to geriatric nurses, presumably as a result of frequently having to reposition patients (see Figure 1): for these workers, “frequent lifting and carrying of heavy loads” (72%) occurs more than three times as often as for other employed persons (21%); a similar pattern is seen with “frequent working in forced postures” (44% vs. 16%), and “working while standing” is also way above-average at 91%. Among nurses, the physical demands are not quite as high compared to those for geriatric nurses but are nevertheless significantly above average.

Temporal demands in care work

In addition there are temporal stress factors: about 45% of nurses and around 38% of geriatric nurses engage in shift work (see Figure 1), which places restrictions on their social lives and recreational opportunities. However, in many cases, recreation is also poorly addressed during working hours in these occupations. For example, compared to the average, more than twice as many nurses (54%) and 39% of geriatric nurses report frequent cancellation of breaks. The main reason both groups give for cancellation of breaks is having too much work, whereas other employed persons predominantly refer to an inability to accommodate the break in the workflow.

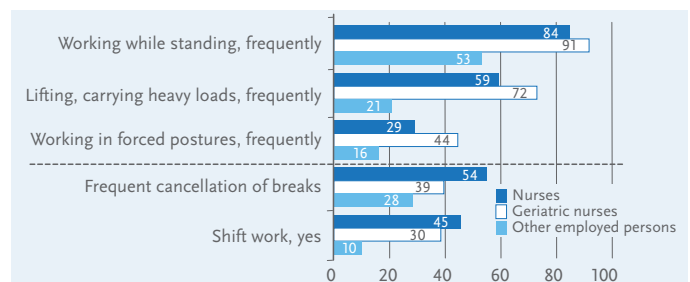


Fig. 1: Employed persons (in %) subject to frequent physical and temporal demands

Mental demands in care work

Work is also subject to increased mental demands in almost all care professions. This particularly affects nurses, with approximately 66% working frequently both under “great deadline pressure and pressure to perform” and with disturbances and interruptions. Furthermore, three quarters of nurses also often

have to manage different tasks at the same time; more than half often have to work very quickly; and almost a third state that they frequently work at the limits of their capabilities – twice as many as the average. However, geriatric nurses also report high mental demands more often than average (see Figure 2).

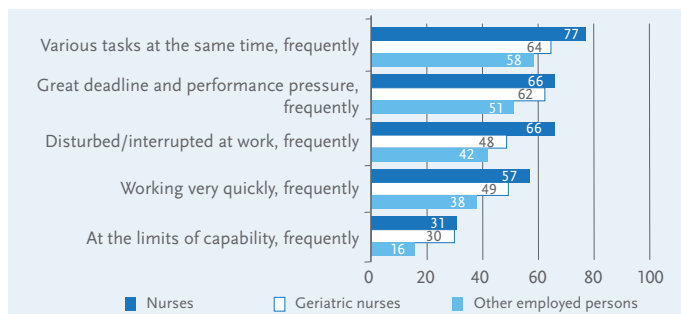


Fig. 2: Employed persons (in %) with frequent mental demands

Resources in care work

Resources such as broad scope for action or comprehensive social support can make an important contribution to coping with high demands of this kind. However, scope for action for care workers does not differ systematically from that for other employed persons: with respect to influence on the amount of work, nurses are somewhat below (31%) and geriatric nurses are somewhat above (37%) the average figure of 35%. In terms of the possibility of planning and arranging tasks, the reverse is true: nurses can do this to a greater extent (72%) and geriatric nurses to a lesser extent (64%) than other employed persons (69%). The possibility of deciding for oneself when to take a break is lower, in fact, in both care professions (nurses: 41%; geriatric nurses: 47%) than elsewhere (59%).

On the other hand, the feeling that one's own work is important is more widespread: 90% or more frequently see their work as important (other employed persons: 77%). Furthermore, social components such as sense of community, positive cooperation and support from colleagues are better than average, at over 80% for care workers. Care workers are given help and support by superiors less (55% in each case) than other employed persons (59%).

Stress and health complaints in care work

If one considers the extent to which employed persons feel able to meet quantitative requirements, it must be noted that, com-

pared to the average (18%), about twice as many nurses (34%) and geriatric nurses (30%) feel overburdened. Furthermore, almost half of geriatric nurses and 61% of nurses report an increase in stress in the last two years, which is significantly more than the figure for the sample as a whole (41%). Musculo-skeletal complaints (e.g. pain in the neck and shoulder area) and psychovegetative complaints (e.g. night-time sleep disturbances) are also above average in the care professions (see Figure 3). Not even a third of care workers are free of psychovegetative complaints. Of nurses, 35% even suffer from three or four psychovegetative complaints.

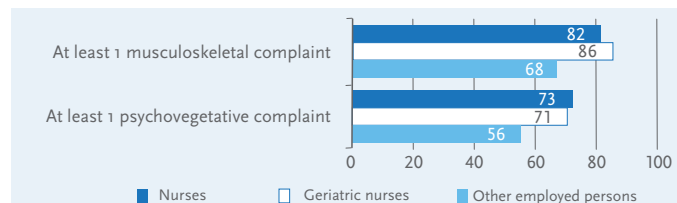


Fig. 3: Employed persons (in %) with at least one musculoskeletal/psychovegetative complaint

Summary

As the data shows, persons employed in care professions are subject to a variety of above-average requirements, which is also reflected in the values relating to overwork, increased stress and health complaints. This may contribute to findings indicating that the proportion of older care workers who have been in the profession for more than 20 years is very low and that – compared with the rest of Europe, alongside the United Kingdom and Italy – German care workers have the greatest desire to leave the profession. In an ageing society, in which not only the demand for care but also the average age of care workers is increasing, at the same time as the retirement age is being raised, a greater focus must be placed on designing favourable working conditions in the care sector.

Would you like to find out more about this topic?

You can find detailed information on the care sector on our website "Branchenschwerpunkt ambulante und stationäre Pflege" [Industry focus on outpatient and inpatient care, in German]: www.baua.de/pflege. For further information on working conditions in Germany, please visit www.baua.de/dok/717904. The Stress Report Germany 2012 is also available to download at www.baua.de/dok/3430796 [in German].

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