



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Ceannasaí Náisiúnta Oibríochtaí Meabhairshláinte
Ospidéal Naomh Lómáin Baile Phámar Baile Átha Cliath20.

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April 9th 2021,
Deputy Martin Browne
Dail Eireann,
Dublin 2.

PQ
Number: 14725/21

To ask the Minister for Health the measures being taken to qualify persons in the area of mental health given that the availability of skilled staff is a significant issue; the reason for much of the potential workforce availing of employment opportunities outside of Ireland; the additional cost in each of the past three years incurred through the filling of staff shortages through the work of locums, agency workers and overtime comparative to the cost of employing staff members; and if he will make a statement on the matter. -Martin Browne

Dear Deputy Browne,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

The availability of skilled staff is a significant issue in mental health services where demand outstrips supply in both the national and international contexts and our potential workforce are availing of employment opportunities outside of Ireland. This is symptomatic of the overall recruitment problem that Mental Health services have been experiencing for the past number of years. It is recognised that there is a current shortage of trained mental health staff nationally and this trend is not unique to Ireland. Ongoing efforts, locally, nationally and internationally, are continuing in order to ensure that all available avenues are explored, including for example national and international recruitment and national development of post graduate training programmes for mental health nurses in terms of sourcing staff and providing a staffing supply for Mental Health services.

The HSE also has on-going international recruitment campaigns, which take place in a competitive environment against global shortages of health professionals, including psychiatric nurses & consultants. Psychiatric Nursing offers a comprehensive career pathway from Staff Nurse to Clinical Specialist or Advanced Practitioner, together with leadership roles in nursing management. All 2020 nursing interns on clinical placement have been offered permanent contracts although it is notable that personal preference for location in particular often influences the decision to take up a contract. The HSE National Doctors Training Programme is working to address recruitment and retention issues of consultant psychiatrists nationwide, including the consideration of local recruitment pilot projects. There is a significant shortage of specialist psychiatrist positions worldwide and this affects the delivery of service. It is clear that both supply and demand of the Mental Health workforce needs to



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be more aligned in order to reflect the ever-changing community and healthcare landscapes. In addition, this work needs to be understood in the context of the implementation of the both Sláintecare and Sharing the Vision reports, and actions emanating from these. It is important to note that it should not be assumed that new Service Improvement and Clinical Programme Initiatives will necessarily result in the need for additional staff. *Sharing the Vision* promotes shared multi-disciplinary working, redeployment and utilisation of the NGO sector. The current emphasis on integration and the importance of primary care provision for the service user may necessitate local services reconfiguring and reorienting services. We need to be mindful of the potential for, and the benefits arising from reconfiguration, particularly in the context of a diminishing pool of health care staff globally.

Mental Health Services are unique in the balance between acute inpatient care and community focused delivery of care. The staffing environment of the HSE Mental Health Services is constantly changing and subject to significant service demands (winter planning, COVID & non-COVID). Rather than a matter of geographical hotspots or particular services, potential staff make recruitment decisions based on a number of factors including where the post is based, a perception of services that are particularly challenging and the cost of living in urban areas continues to be a challenge not just for Mental Health but all areas in terms of recruitment. All of these factors contribute to a difficulty in attracting candidates. There are also particular posts for which there is a deficit in qualified applicants within the overall pool of qualified applicants in mental health particularly psychiatric nurses and consultant psychiatrists meaning that candidates will choose their work environments that will suit them from a work life balance perspective and some posts can be difficult to fill. These factors have to be considered as relating to difficulties within the Irish health system such as the austerity related budget cuts, deteriorating terms and working conditions and complexities in the recruitment process. Despite these challenges and difficulties, Mental Health services continue to work with our local HR colleagues and at a national level through the HSE Health Business Services National Recruitment to achieve recruitment results in as efficient a time frame as possible for posts to be filled in line with HSE recruitment guidelines.

It is often the case that staff shortages are filled on an intermittent basis by locum, agency and overtime. The table below details the Mental Health-Agency & Overtime premia cost in the past three years.



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| Mental Health - Agency & Overtime premia cost | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Agency | | | |
| | 2020 spend (excl Covid) | 2019 Spend | 2018 Spend |
| | € | € | € |
| Total Agency expenditure | 64,614,664 | 57,987,415 | 55,762,034 |
| Base cost of posts | 49,703,588 | 44,605,704 | 42,893,872 |
| Agency premia 30% | 14,911,076 | 13,381,711 | 12,868,162 |
| Overtime | | | |
| | 2020 spend (excl Covid) | 2019 Spend | 2018 Spend |
| | € | € | € |
| Total overtime expenditure | 24,994,361 | 26,128,176 | 24,550,396 |
| Base cost of posts | 21,602,732 | 22,582,693 | 21,219,011 |
| Overtime premia 15.7% | 3,391,629 | 3,545,483 | 3,331,385 |
| Agency & Overtime additional cost | 18,302,705 | 16,927,194 | 16,199,546 |
| <i>Note: this calculation assumes that the premium cost for agency provided staff is 30% (ie incl 23% VAT & other costs) and 15.7% for overtime expenditure</i> | | | |

Agency in Mental Health can be split into 3 distinct categories:

1. Nursing/Support agency required to replace the high levels of leavers in MH services, mainly in Acute units. Agency is required to keep rostering levels at safe levels.
2. Nursing/Support agency relating to "specialling" arrangements which has increased greatly over the last 4 years.
3. Medical Agency which predominately relates to Medical Consultants in Community teams which are more difficult posts to fill than Consultant posts in Acute units.



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The Agency costs experienced in Mental Health relate to the requirement to fulfil rostered staffing levels in Mental Health in-patient units and to respond to complex and challenging behavior through specialists which cannot be filled through permanent staff. The regulatory environment and best practice standards mean that this staffing is essential. Agency costs are also incurred to fill essential medical posts through locum/agency arrangements which Mental Health services are unable to appoint on a permanent basis due to the international labor market. Even with efforts towards permanent appointments it is apparent that there are a cohort of staff who wish to work through agencies where they can choose when and where they work.

In conclusion, HSE recruitment, training and management of vacancies for skilled staff continues to be a challenge for Mental Health Services and we continue to work on all available options to address these matters.

I trust this information is of assistance to you but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas O'Brien
General Manager Mental Health Services