How and why will hospitals have changed in Germany by 2029?

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The German Hospital Federation is the representative organ of all German hospitals. We advocate the interests of all of the 1,951 (2018) German hospitals, regardless of the kind of ownership on the national, European and international level. Today, German hospitals are already confronted with multiple challenges, which will continue to shape the hospital and healthcare landscape in the coming years: an increasing nursing shortage problem, the challenge of integrated care restructuring, and the digital transformation process.

First of all, German hospitals are experiencing a nursing shortage. Today, there are already about 12,000 vacancies in this sector. Demographic change will aggravate this situation. With the gradual aging of society comes the need for more healthcare and the increased demand for skilled workers, which further exacerbates the nursing shortage. Secondly, hospitals challenge the integrated care restructuring, for example, in emergency care. Thirdly, the digital transformation process of our society does not stop at the hospital and healthcare sector. Hence, the development and implementation of digital tools in the healthcare sector will continue to be an important task at hand in the coming years.

Reacting to the nursing shortage, the German Hospital Federation is engaged in getting more people interested in the nursing profession and participating in health policy initiatives to recruit personnel in Germany and abroad. Besides this, we deal with several political initiatives aiming to strengthen the nursing profession, such as the implementation of a restructured general nursing education, the application of nurse-to-patient staffing ratios and the restructuring of the German DRG system. It is vital that politicians, stakeholders, and hospitals work hand in hand on the valorization of the nursing profession. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to strengthen the nursing profession without weakening the financial situation of hospitals to ensure that hospitals can remain attractive workplaces and reliable employers. That is why the ongoing restructuring of the German DRG system – the removal of nursing care costs from the existing billing structure - must not be a financial burden on hospitals.

Concerning integrated care, the German care system has already moved from a traditional inpatient-centric and outpatient-centric system to a system where both work closely together. In the future, the importance of coordination will continue to progress. As a core idea of well-functioning cross-sectoral care, the possibilities for hospitals to participate in outpatient care should be expanded. It could be worthwhile to consider the creation of common specialist medical care structures. In Germany, hospitals are currently challenged by the political idea of restructuring the emergency care coordination between the sectors. On the one hand, there could be the creation of common emergency control centers, which will evaluate emergency calls and decide on the directing of the patients: sending ambulances, directing to office-based sector or to hospital sector. On the other hand, hospitals could face the creation of ‘emergency care centers’ which will be in charge of the ‘triage on the ground’. In every case, it is important that hospitals will have the lead in the reorganization of integrated care restructuring in emergency care.

Both the strengthening of the nursing profession and the integration of a care system are directly linked to the last great challenge to be mentioned here: the digital transformation. Digital technologies are considered to have the potential to improve care, to change working conditions of caregivers and to advance the exchange of information between the health sectors. New technologies will therefore take an increasingly important place in German hospitals. After having implemented the electronic health insurance card in 2015, Germany currently is dealing with the framing of the Electronic Patient Record (EPR). Beside these opportunities, we are also observing tensions between digital innovations on the one hand and patient safety, data protection concerns and user-friendly application on the other hand. In order to maintain confidence in the new digital technologies, it is important to involve all stakeholders in their development and implementation. At the very least, it is absolutely certain that the ambitious plan of digitalizing healthcare sector requires important financial support from the governments.

The German hospitals hope that the nursing shortage problem is taken seriously and is countered by a wide variety of measures. It remains uncertain if these measures will be successful. Therefore, we will closely follow the implementation and results of the engaged measures to react, and readjust if necessary. Uniform remuneration structures are an important prerequisite for deepening cross-sector care. The success of the digital transformation process largely depends on financial support admitted to the hospitals. There might be doubts about the willingness of large financial support as we already see a lack of investment in the maintenance of ordinary structures. Calling for enough money for modern healthcare structures was in the past and will be in the future our main task – well-equipped hospitals are the best for the patients.

About the German Hospital Federation

The German Hospital Federation (DKG – Deutsche Krankenhausgesellschaft e.V.) is the representative organ of all German hospitals. It bundles and advocates their interests regardless of the kind of ownership. Public, private for profit and private not-for-profit, or charity-based hospital owners are unionized in DKG via its member organizations: 16 associations on the Federal States level (Bundesländer) are providing special services to the hospitals in their region, e.g. negotiating hospital plans and prices. The other type of DKG’s members are the twelve national associations, dedicated to each type of ownership which bundle the special interests of their hospitals. On this broad basis, DKG represents the whole range of interests of the providers of hospital care. Since its foundation in 1949, DKG established itself as the representative of hospital interests and is itself a private not-for-profit organization. DKG is not only a key player in German healthcare politics but also got and gets provided with a continuously growing list of responsibilities with regard to the principle of self-governance, inherent to the national healthcare system. In addition to its political and administrative responsibilities, DKG is dedicated to maintaining public dialogue on hospital policy, the exchange of knowledge and the support of scientific research, also cross-border and on an international level.