



## Open Letter to the European Commission: Protect Health Professionals in a Changing Climate

*To: President of the European Commission, Mrs. Ursula von der Leyen*

*CC: Executive Vice-President, Mrs. Teresa Ribera; Executive Vice-President, Mr. Stéphane Séjourné; Commissioner for Climate, Net Zero and Clean Growth, Mr. Wopke Hoekstra; Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, Olivér Várhelyi.*

Dear President of the European Commission, Mrs Ursula von der Leyen,

As health professionals, we are writing to express our concern about the impacts of climate change, particularly extreme heat, on health professionals across the EU. Through the **#HandleTheHeat** campaign, we stand together in calling on the European Union to help build climate-resilient hospitals and health systems that protect staff, patients, and communities in a changing climate.

Across Europe, health professionals are already confronting the impacts of climate change on the front lines of care. Extreme heat, poor air quality driven by wildfire smoke and pollution, and other climate-related environmental stressors are increasingly affecting both the delivery of care and the health and safety of those delivering it, contributing to rising risks of heat stress, respiratory illness, and reduced ability to safely perform clinical work ([Tesfaye et al., 2025](#)). In short, climate change is a public health emergency unfolding in real time, and health professionals are on the front lines, bearing the brunt. Yet across Europe, health systems remain underprepared to protect those who deliver care. That's why we need hospitals that can **#HandleTheHeat**.

This call comes at a critical moment. The European Union still lacks a dedicated Strategy on Climate and Health, despite growing support from some Member States for a coordinated EU approach. Without it, responses remain fragmented across Member States, limiting preparedness, investment, and collaboration across Europe's health systems.

Health organisations across Europe have repeatedly called for such a strategy, including through joint statements and calls to action, to provide a coherent framework for action. A dedicated EU Strategy on Climate and Health would help make Europe's health systems more resilient to climate change, improve preparedness for climate-related health threats, and ensure that health is systematically integrated into EU climate and resilience policies.

**#HandleTheHeat**



The upcoming European Integrated Framework on Climate Resilience presents an important opportunity to advance this integration and move toward a comprehensive EU Strategy on Climate and Health that, crucially:

- integrates mitigation and adaptation measures,
- embeds health considerations across EU policies, and
- strengthens the resilience of health systems and critical infrastructure.

We, as health professionals on the front lines of care, experience these climate pressures directly in our daily work and **support a comprehensive EU Strategy on Climate and Health** that translates into more resilient health systems that can protect both patients and staff in practice from the impacts of climate change.

However, this strategic coordination must be **matched by urgent action on the ground** to protect health professionals already operating under climate-related strain. Health professionals are not only responding to the climate crisis – we are also impacted by it. Particularly, during extreme heat, the care workforce often faces exhausting and unsafe working conditions while continuing to provide care under increasing strain, as hospitals face pressure from overheating infrastructure to rising patient demand.

**Resilience must be built into hospitals and health systems – not demanded from the people delivering care.** Coordinated EU action is urgently needed to ensure care settings across Europe are prepared for a changing climate.

**When we protect health professionals and enable them to do their jobs safely, we strengthen protection for every person who depends on their care.**

In line with the EU’s ambition to become resilient by design, we call on the European Union to implement the following measures to protect health professionals and strengthen climate resilience across the health sector:

### **1) Protect health professionals from occupational heat risks, especially heat**

Climate change, especially extreme heat, is increasingly exposing health professionals to occupational heat stress, impairing their ability to perform job-related tasks and deteriorating their physical and cognitive performance when “uncomfortably hot” ([Davey et al, 2024](#)).



Due to the alarming number of heat-related workplace deaths in the EU, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has already formulated a resolution calling for an EU Directive on the Prevention of Occupational Heat Risks to protect professionals' health in Europe. Special attention must be paid to health professionals because the health system can only protect others if its own professionals are healthy.

Measures should include:

- mandatory heat risk assessments in healthcare facilities, including monitoring working temperatures, with clear targets and the investment needed to make this achievable in practice;
- psychological support, including addressing fatigue, stress, and burnout linked to prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures;
- the use of equipment and clothing appropriate to climate conditions;
- provision of cooling and resting areas with access to drinking water and shade;
- training for staff to recognise and promptly address heat-related health threats and symptoms in patients and colleagues; and
- ensuring safe staffing levels so that taking necessary heat-related breaks does not leave colleagues overstretched or patients unattended.

Existing frameworks provide a basis but leave critical gaps, particularly regarding heat exposure and worker adaptation, which are not addressed at all.<sup>1</sup>

## **2) Address workforce shortages and strengthen EU-level coordination (HERA)**

Europe already faces a shortage of 1.2 million health professionals (OECD, 2024). Climate-related pressures risk deepening this crisis. Without action, staffing levels will be further strained during heatwaves and other extreme weather events, placing additional pressure on working conditions and patient care. The mandate of the Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA) should be expanded beyond medical countermeasures to include workforce planning and support during crises such as heatwaves.

This should include:

- coordinating workforce deployment across countries during climate emergencies;
- supporting training and capacity-building across Member States;
- developing EU-wide monitoring and early warning tools;

1) EU-OSHA provides non-legally binding "Heat at Work", Guidance for workplaces, and the OSH Framework Directive (89/391/EEC) establishes that employers have a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of professionals in all aspects related to work.



- ensuring that health professionals themselves are involved in preparedness planning and decision-making, for example by including nurses as members of the European Health Security Council (Proposal of the European Federation of Nurses Associations, 2024); and
- integrating climate change and health into higher education curricula and professional development initiatives.

### **3) Shift from emergency response to preparedness and prevention with an EU-wide Early Warning System (EWS)**

The EU must move from reactive crisis management to proactive preparedness. This means anticipating risks, acting early, and reducing impacts before they escalate into emergencies.

A key step is the development of an EU-wide Early Warning System (EWS) for climate-related health risks. Such systems can identify emerging hazards and guide timely action to minimise pressure on healthcare infrastructure and services (UNDP, 2025). They help prevent avoidable deaths and reduce the burden on health professionals during crises.

Heat-related mortality and morbidity monitoring are critical components of this effort. They enable faster, more targeted responses, improve understanding of how heat affects health, and support the design of interventions that reduce strain on healthcare services while strengthening system resilience (EEA, 2024). Currently, early warning systems across Europe are fragmented (EEA, 2024). Because climate change and heat do not stop at national borders, preparedness cannot stop there either. A coordinated EU approach is needed to harmonise data, facilitate knowledge-sharing, and ensure consistent levels of protection across countries.

Preparedness should be recognised as an investment, not a cost. According to WRI, every \$1 invested in climate adaptation can generate more than \$10 in benefits over ten years. Returns are particularly high in the health sector, where adaptation investments are projected to deliver returns of over 78%, while investments in disaster risk management – such as Early Warning Systems – deliver nearly 36% on average by safeguarding lives and infrastructure and minimising economic disruption (WRI, 2025).



Preparedness directly shapes working conditions on the ground. When systems can anticipate and respond early, hospitals face fewer surges, services remain functional, and health professionals are less exposed to surge pressure and climate threats. In practice, this means fewer crisis situations in which staff are forced to work beyond safe limits.

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The above actions can protect health professionals and ensure that hospitals, health systems, and healthcare professionals can continue to deliver care safely in a changing climate.

The European Union now faces a clear choice: leave health professionals exposed to the impacts of climate change, or build systems that properly protect them and safeguard public health.

We urge the European Union to act with the urgency this public health emergency demands.

Signed,

## **Health professionals across Europe**

*An initiative of the #HandleTheHeat: Health professionals for Climate-Ready Hospitals campaign, led by Health Care Without Harm Europe*