

The number of doctors per capita varies widely across European countries. In 2012, Greece had, by far, the highest number, with 6.2 doctors per 1 000 population, nearly twice the EU average of 3.4. Following Greece was Austria, with 4.9 doctors per 1 000 population. The number of doctors per capita was also relatively high in Lithuania and Portugal (although the number reported in Portugal is an overestimation as it comprises all doctors licensed to practice, including some who may not be practising). The number of doctors per capita was lowest in Poland, Romania and Slovenia among EU member states (Figure 3.1.1).

Since 2000, the number of physicians per capita has increased in all European countries, except in France where it has remained stable. On average across EU member states, physician density increased from 2.9 doctors per 1 000 population in 2000 to 3.4 in 2012. The rise in the number of doctors per capita was particularly rapid in Greece, but most of the growth occurred before the economic crisis started in 2008. The growth rate has also been very strong in the United Kingdom, which started from the second lowest level in 2000, thereby narrowing the gap with other EU countries (Figure 3.1.1).

In most European countries, the absolute number of doctors has increased both before and after the 2008-09 economic crisis, although the number has stabilised in some countries hard hit by the recession such as Greece. In the United Kingdom, there were over 10% more employed doctors in 2012 compared with 2008 (Figure 3.1.2). Looking at the entire period from 2000 to 2012, there were 50% more doctors in the United Kingdom in 2012 compared with 2000. In the Netherlands also, the number of doctor has increased steadily since 2000, and there were over one-third more doctors in 2011 (latest year available) compared with 2000. In Germany, the number of doctors has increased slightly more rapidly since 2008 than between 2000 and 2008; overall, there were about 20% more doctors in 2012 compared with 2000.

There continues to be concerns in many European countries about current or future possible shortages of doctors, notably for certain categories of doctors (e.g., primary care doctors) or in rural areas (see Indicator 5.3). These concerns are linked to a large extent to the ageing of the medical workforce. In 2012, on average across EU countries, one-in-three doctor (33%) was over 55 years of age, up from one-in-six (17%) in 2000. While many of these doctors may be expected to retire over the coming decade, one noticeable trend observed in many countries in recent years is that a larger number of doctors continue to practice after age 65. In France, the continued increase in the absolute number of doctors since 2008 has been driven mainly by a growing number of doctors remaining in activity beyond age 65 (DREES, 2014).

Many countries have also anticipated the upcoming retirement of a significant number of doctors by increasing their education and training efforts to make sure that there would be enough new doctors to replace those who will be retiring. In some countries (e.g., the United Kingdom and

the Netherlands), there are even concerns now that there might be surpluses of certain categories of doctors in the years ahead. This has led to recommendations to reduce slightly student intakes in medical schools or post-graduate training for certain specialties (e.g., CfWI, 2012; ACMMP, 2014).

In most countries, concerns about growing shortages of primary care doctors reflect the growing imbalance in the number of generalists versus specialists. In response to these concerns, many countries have taken steps to improve the number of post-graduate training places (internship and residency posts) and the attractiveness of general practice by improving working conditions and remuneration levels. A number of countries have also introduced or extended the roles of other health care providers, such as advanced practice nurses, to respond to growing demands for primary care (Delamaire and Lafortune, 2010).

The European Joint Action on Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting, launched in 2012, aims to promote collaboration and exchange between member states to better prepare the future health workforce.

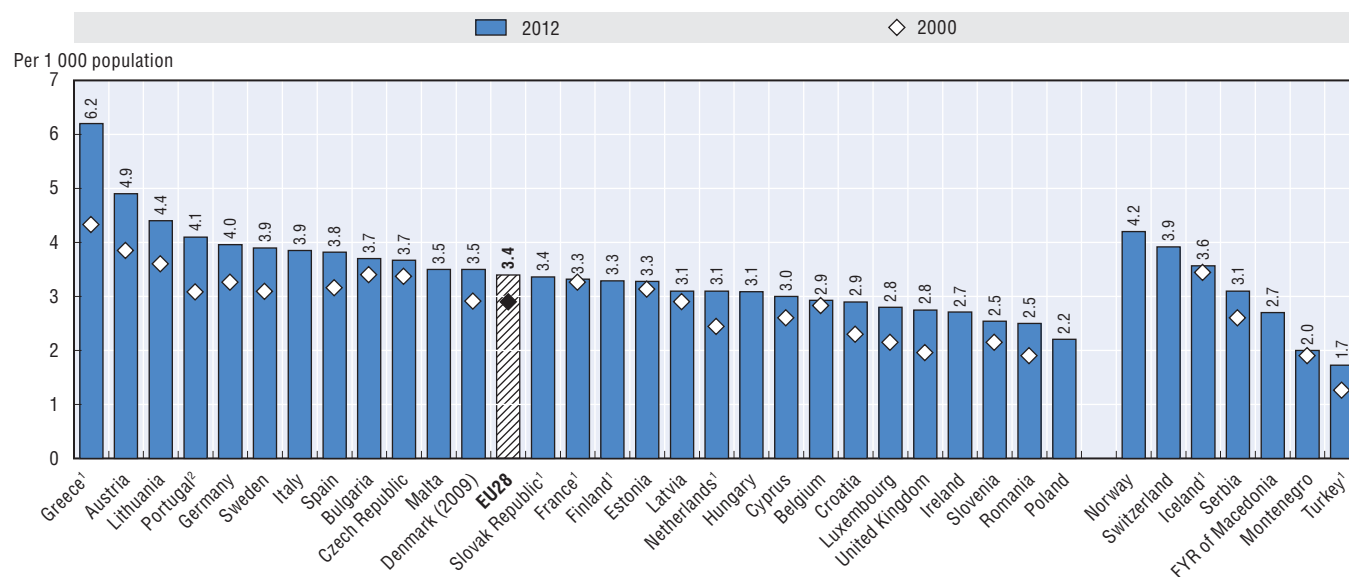
Definition and comparability

Practising physicians are defined as doctors who are providing care directly to patients. In some countries, the numbers also include doctors working in administration, management, academic and research positions (“professionally active” physicians), adding another 5-10% of doctors. Portugal reports all physicians entitled to practice, resulting in an even greater overestimation.

References

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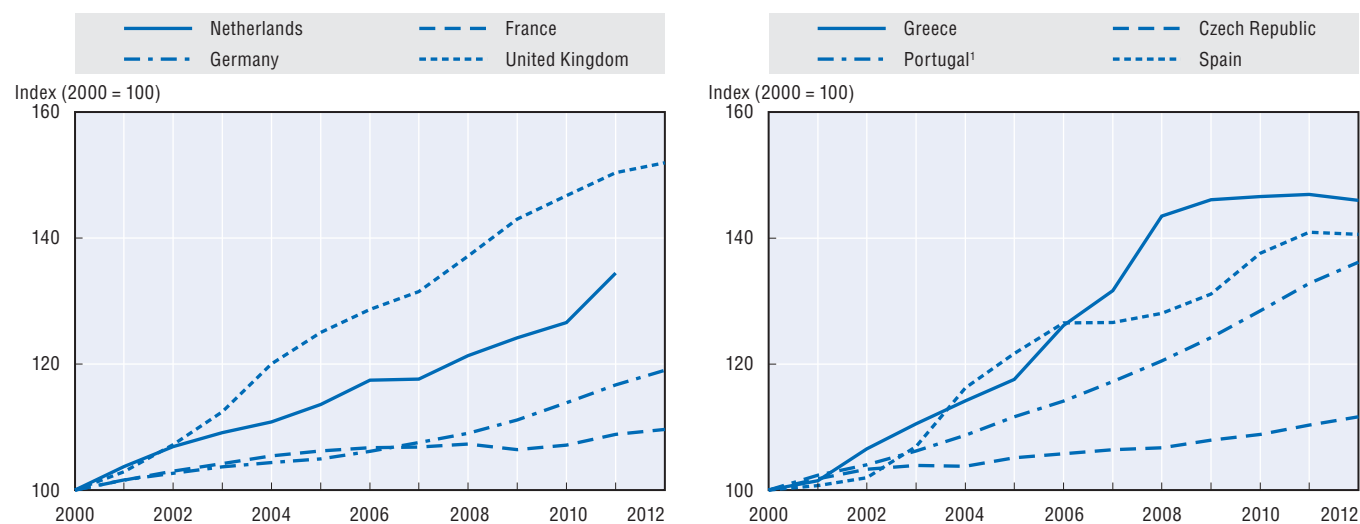
3.1.1. Practising doctors per 1 000 population, 2000 and 2012 (or nearest year)



1. Data include not only doctors providing direct care to patients, but also those working in the health sector as managers, educators, researchers, etc. (adding another 5-10% of doctors).
2. Data refer to all physicians who are licensed to practice.


Source: OECD Health Statistics 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/health-data-en>; Eurostat Statistics Database; WHO Europe Health for All Database.

3.1.2. Evolution in the number of doctors, selected EU countries, 2000 to 2012 (or nearest year)



1. Data refer to doctors licensed to practice.

Source: OECD Health Statistics 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/health-data-en>; Eurostat Statistics Database.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933155557>



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