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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Crisis in the health sector: Impact on nurses' working conditions<sup>☆</sup>

Alberto Granero-Lázaro<sup>a,\*</sup>, Josep M. Blanch-Ribas<sup>b</sup>, Juan Francisco Roldán-Merino<sup>c</sup>, Jordi Torralbas-Ortega<sup>a</sup>, Ana María Escayola-Maranges<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centro de Salud Mental, Parc Taulí Hospital Universitario, Instituto de Investigación e Innovación Parc Taulí I3PT, Sabadell, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>b</sup> Departamento de Psicología Social, Facultad de Psicología, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB), Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>c</sup> Escuela Universitaria de Enfermería Sant Joan de Déu, Campus Docente Sant Joan de Déu, Universidad de Barcelona (UB), Esplugues de Llobregat, Barcelona, Spain

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### KEYWORDS

Nurses;  
Working conditions;  
Quality of life;  
Workload;  
Personnel turnover;  
Salaries and fringe benefits

**Abstract** In a context of economic crisis and policies to reduce the public deficit, the budgets of the Catalan Health Institute (CHI) were cut by 15.33% between 2010 and 2014.

**Objective:** To assess the perceived impact on nurses' work conditions of measures to contain health spending.

**Method:** The study design was descriptive and transversal. A sample of 1760 nurses from the province of Barcelona answered a questionnaire on the perceived impact of health spending containment measures implemented in their workplace during the early years of the crisis.

**Results:** Among the main aspects of the perceived impact of these measures, 86.6% of the nurses identified a pay cut and an increase in the following relevant parameters of their working conditions: number of hours worked (66.7%), final ratio of treated patients (35.2%), task complexity and workload (75.3%), rotation through various departments (31.5%), work shifts (21.4%) or work areas (23.4%), job insecurity (58.4%) and loss of employment by dismissal (6.6%) or non-renewal of contract (9%).

**Conclusions:** The perceived impact of the crisis showed a triple negative component: pay cut, work overload and job insecurity. As a combined effect of this multiple trend, the nurses acknowledged a deterioration in their working conditions and quality of working life.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [albertgranerolazaro@gmail.com](mailto:albertgranerolazaro@gmail.com) (A. Granero-Lázaro).

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Enfermeras;  
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Carga de trabajo;  
Rotación de personal;  
Salarios y beneficios

**Crisis en el sector sanitario: impacto percibido en las condiciones de trabajo de las enfermeras**

**Resumen** En un contexto de crisis económica y de políticas de reducción del déficit público, los presupuestos del Instituto Catalán de la Salud (ICS) fueron recortados en un 15.33% entre 2010 y 2014.

**Objetivo:** Evaluar el impacto percibido de las medidas de contención del gasto sanitario en las condiciones de trabajo de las enfermeras.

**Método:** El diseño del estudio fue descriptivo y transversal. Una muestra de 1.760 enfermeras de la provincia de Barcelona respondió un cuestionario sobre el impacto percibido de las medidas de contención del gasto sanitario implementadas en su centro de trabajo durante los primeros años de la crisis.

**Resultados:** Entre los aspectos principales del impacto percibido por las medidas de contención del gasto, un 86,6% de las enfermeras identificaron una reducción salarial. También percibieron un aumento en los siguientes parámetros relevantes de las condiciones de trabajo: número de horas trabajadas (66,7%), ratio definitivo de pacientes atendidos (35,2%), complejidad y presión asistencial (75,3%), rotación por diversos servicios (31,5%), cambio de turno (21,4%) o ámbito (23,4%) de trabajo, precariedad laboral (58,4%) y pérdida del empleo por despido (6,6%) o no renovación del contrato (9%).

**Conclusiones:** El impacto percibido de la crisis mostró un triple componente de signo negativo: recorte salarial, sobrecarga de trabajo e inseguridad en el empleo. Y como efecto combinado de esta múltiple tendencia se reconoció un deterioro de las condiciones de trabajo y de la calidad de vida laboral de las enfermeras.

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**What is known?**

In the context of the financial crisis, the Catalan Health Institute and publicly funded health centres have applied spending cuts that have had an impact on the working dynamic of healthcare centres.

**What do we contribute?**

This study identifies the perceived impact of the spending cuts on nurses' working conditions and warns of their possible consequences for professional practitioners.

**Introduction**

According to the first results of the Sixth European survey on working conditions 2015, the way the last decade's financial crisis is being managed is affecting the working conditions of European workers.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the Spanish government opted to implement austerity policies rather than promote strategies to stimulate and increase public spending in order to reactivate economic activity; this has had major economic and financial, political and social repercussions.<sup>2</sup> Since 2010, measures have been implemented to cut spending on personnel, such as: *Real Decreto Ley* (RDL) 8/2010 of 20 May, establishing as an extraordinary and proactive

measure a 5% reduction in the salaries of public sector workers and civil service staff<sup>3</sup>; RDL 20/2011 of 30 December, ruling that public sector staff pay would not be increased in 2012 from that in force as at 31 December 2011<sup>4</sup>; RDL 20/2012 of 13 July, on means to guarantee budgetary stability and promote competitiveness, which abolished the December bonus and special allowance or equivalents, and also lowered the number of days of discretionary holiday, etc.<sup>5</sup> Another measure applied was provided by Act 2/2012 of 29 June on national budgets, establishing that the working week for Spanish public sector workers be no less than 37.5 h.<sup>6</sup>

Like their Spanish and European neighbours, also affected by the crisis,<sup>7</sup> since 2010, Catalonia has applied various measures to cut spending and reduce the public deficit, some of which provided by the abovementioned RDL.<sup>3-5</sup> In order to legitimise this manner of approaching the crisis, at the beginning of 2011, the Catalan government highlighted public spending on health as the primary factor for the system's deficit.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to this assessment, the Centre of Analysis and Health Programmes (CAPS) and ATTAC *España* (Spanish Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Citizen's Action)<sup>9,10</sup> pointed out that the main source of unsustainability in healthcare was the lack of funding and excessive pharmaceutical expenditure. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data on Health Care Quality Indicators<sup>11</sup> follow the same line, highlighting for example that government expenditure over gross domestic product in 2010 was lower in Catalonia (6.4%) than in the rest of Spain (7.2%) and lower than the OECD (6.7%) and European averages (7.6%). The Catalan government drew up a Health Plan 2011–2015 towards achieving

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