

Statement on mandatory nursing internships requirements before medical studies

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1. Introduction

The Swiss Medical Students' Association (swimsa) is the voice of over 10'000 medical students. We actively engage in the public discourse on our current and future role in the healthcare system, as well as issues pertaining to medical studies.

On September 30, 2024, the parliament of the Canton of Zurich introduced a motion to make a six-month nursing internship a mandatory prerequisite **before** even applying to the entrance exam of medical school¹. The Zurich section of the VSAO, the Executive Council of the Canton of Zurich, and the Association of Medical Students of the University of Zurich (fvmed) have since expressed their opposition to this measure.²⁻⁴ While this may appear to be a purely cantonal issue, similar proposals for a lengthy mandatory nursing internship prior to medical school admission have previously been discussed at the federal level.⁵

As a national body, swimsa wishes to take this opportunity to support VSAO Zurich's statement and offer the perspective of medical students on why such proposals for mandatory nursing internships before medical school should be rejected — in Zurich and in any other canton.

2. Main

There is no evidence that the number of doctors leaving the profession would be reduced.

The proponents of the measure state that it would reduce the number of doctors leaving the profession by providing an early immersion in the hospital setting, confronting students wishing to apply with the reality of the suffering of patients. swimsa could not find solid evidence backing this line of thought. In 2023, swimsa surveyed medical students on their reasons for wanting to leave the profession and overwhelmingly found that poor working conditions are causing some to consider other career paths.⁶ The improvement of working conditions should therefore be the focus to reduce the number of medical students or doctors who leave the profession.

The measure would be a financial burden on candidates to medical studies.

While the executive of the canton Zurich has insisted on how fastidious and expensive organizing so many internships would be for the hospitals ⁴, swimsa wishes to emphasize that these long internships would be financially unviable and inequitable for the candidates. Currently, medical **students from several universities are already required to complete 1 month nursing internships during their bachelors**. These internships consist of full-time contracts with low compensations, either between 500 and 1'500 sFr. per month, or nothing at all.⁷ In any case, this clearly does not cover living expenses anywhere in Switzerland, and swimsa has not seen any indication that the internships would be better compensated in the new proposals. Longer mandatory internships would discriminate against students with less financial support and increase the risk that aspiring medical students would be used as cheap, unskilled labour, exploiting their earnest wish to study medicine.

The proposal ignores the fact that many medical students already work part-time jobs assisting nurses.

They do so to finance their studies. It does provide them with some clinical experience, yet at a much higher hourly wage than the hourly equivalent of 500 to 1'500 sFr. a month. Compensations for these are usually more aligned with other types of unskilled jobs - see the statistics for every region^{8,9}.

It would prolong medical studies by a year.

The path to becoming a doctor and ultimately a specialist is already long. It currently takes at least six years of university studies to qualify for the federal licensing exam and several more to gain the license to practice independently. A 6-month internship would be impossible to fit between the end of secondary school and the start of the autumn academic semester. Since no medical faculty in Switzerland allows students to begin studying in the spring semester, it would force students to start their studies one calendar year later than currently possible, delaying the start of their medical careers. There is also no mention of what would happen to students who have already gained experience in healthcare before starting their studies. Indeed, many have done so as part of their military/civil service or have studied in other healthcare fields, such as nursing, before applying to medical school. These situations need to be clearly accounted for.

A nursing internship does not guarantee good insights into the daily activities of medical doctors.

Internships completed exclusively in a nursing environment, as proposed in the motion in Zurich, would provide the interns with little insight into the actual work of doctors. Nurses and physicians collaborate intensively, but their day-to-day work remains very different. Long internships spent solely on the nursing side, as put forward in the motion from

Zurich, do not fulfil its stated aim of providing prospective students with a fuller picture of their future medical careers.

In conclusion, the focus should be on supporting medical students through their studies and improving working conditions for them to remain in the medical field afterwards instead of creating new barriers and adding years to medical studies. swimsa especially opposes new internships that would de facto add a year to medical studies, and in general measures only apply to some applicants, instead of aiming for a fair national system, as stated in previous statements¹⁰.

3. VSAO statement

For all further arguments against the motion from Zurich, swimsa refers to the statement from VSAO Zürich from the 12th of October 2024. Here is a list of the main points from that statement. The development is available in the original publication (GE)³.

1. **An internship will not influence the dropout rate**
2. **Working conditions are the actual problem**
3. **Resilience as a selection criterion is a questionable method**
4. **There is already an understanding of the nursing perspective**
5. **Nurses' and doctors' daily activities are not the same**
6. **Additional hurdles and prolongation of the medical studies**
7. **Not a solution for the nursing crisis**
8. **Relevant experience only possible in hospitals**

4. Sources

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