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Lio still has a lot to learn

Will robots be our carers in the future? Machines may well support nursing staff one day. But before then, nurses want most of all to see the implementation of the popular initiative “For better nursing care”, which received the thumbs-up from the electorate in 2021.

EVELINE RUTZ

Lio tells jokes, plays music and knows what the weather will be like. Lio can use a lift and transport things - listens and is patient. Lio is a robot created to ease the burden on nursing staff. First of all, however, the “assistant” has to learn the ropes. “It currently creates more work rather than supporting us,” says Marlies Petrig from the Kompetenzzentrum Pflege und Gesundheit (KZU) nursing home in Embrach. Lio must be spoken to clearly and often has to be told things more than once. Even bringing a drink is a stretch for the robot. Its fine motor skills are limited and it needs regular updates. Lio is far from being able to compete with the staff. Petrig says: “Anyone who was worried about being replaced by Lio wasn’t worried for long.”

The service robot has been at the KZU since June 2022 as part of a pilot project. “We are going to work more with technology going forward,” says Marlies Petrig. It’s especially helpful for the younger employees to get used to these innovations at an early stage so they can familiarise themselves with the technological and ethical issues, she adds.

Designed for repetitive tasks

One day, assistant robots like Lio may well help alleviate the nursing crisis. “They can help offset the staff shortage,” says Albino Miglialo from F&P Robotics, the company that created Lio. Machines are best suited to repetitive tasks, so the professionals have time to do other jobs. “Robots have a lot of potential and are developing fast,” says Miglialo.

In the meantime, the staff hope most of all to see the popular initiative “For better nursing care” bear fruit. It won a clear majority when it

came to a vote on 28 November 2021, with 61 per cent of the Swiss electorate voting in favour. The Swiss Abroad approved the initiative with a similar majority. Hospitals, retirement and nursing homes celebrated: finally, there would be more autonomy and better working conditions for nursing staff. A training drive was also going to attract more people to the profession, at a time when the ageing nature

Robot Lio can also help with making people laugh – it can tell jokes.
Photo: Keystone

of society is posing major challenges. Two years on and not much has changed on the ground. Marlies Petrig feels patience among the nurses is wearing thin. They had expected prompt improvements, she says: “People tend not to realise that it takes time to convert political initiatives into something more tangible.” The situation has actually deteriorated since 2021: the labour market



has dried up and universities of applied sciences are receiving fewer applications. Some cantons and establishments have increased salaries. The Nursing Care Initiative itself, however, is still awaiting implementation.

The professional association wants more action

“You could say that is the price of our democracy,” says Yvonne Ribi, managing director of SBK, the Swiss professional nursing association. Although it may be understandable in political terms, practically speaking the implementation really needs to proceed “much more quickly”, she says. “Many skilled nurses have left and are continuing to leave the profession and too few nurses are receiving training.” Many jobs are not being filled: the workload is being shared among fewer workers.

The Federal Council promised to move the process forward on the day of the vote. As an initial step, it adopted the demands for basic and advanced training. The cantons must, for example, contribute in future to the costs incurred by health facilities when delivering practical training. Moreover, aspiring nurses attending a college of further education or university of applied sciences are to directly receive financial support in the form of education grants if they need help with their living expenses. These new provisions will come into force on 1 July 2024.

A second stage targets better working conditions. The planned measures include more stringent roster requirements. Staff must know in advance when they have to work and receive extra compensation for changes made at short notice. Nurses are also to be able to charge for cer-



Photo: Raphael Moser, Berner Zeitung

“We have to move as quickly as possible to encourage people to stay in the job after completing their training.”

Yvonne Ribi

tain services directly without authorisation from a doctor. This point may still be the subject of discussions in parliament. A decision is expected by the end of 2025.

Employers can make their own improvements

“Of course, we would rather have seen direct improvements than have to go through an incremental process,” says SBK representative Ribi. There will be investment in training from mid-2024 but it’s not enough. “We also have to move as quickly as possible to encourage people to stay in the job after completing their training.”

Yvonne Ribi is pleased that some institutions have acted on their own initiative since the popular decision. They recognised the urgency of the matter and “took steps in the right direction”. The Federal Council has also mentioned taking the opportunity to introduce improvements quickly. In response to criticism from parliament, it wrote that the onus is on the cantons, companies and so-

cial partners to initiate measures within their areas of responsibility – “without waiting for the popular initiative to be implemented at a national level.”

So, what is the KZU nursing home doing to offer an attractive working environment? The first priority is the team leaders, says Marlies Petrig. When the working day can be very challenging and draining, the atmosphere within the team is a game changer. That’s why social skills are needed in addition to professional expertise. The KZU supports staff in their career development and makes a point of keeping work processes simple. “And we convey the meaningfulness of our job – we work at the heartbeat of life itself.”

Lio is well received by most people

Lio gets noticed as he moves along the corridors at Embrach. Residents, visitors and staff greet him with curiosity for the most part. However, some react sceptically or even dismissively. “That’s their prerogative,” says Petrig. She points out that the robot is unmistakeably a robot and doesn’t look human. “The distinction has to be clear.” Lio could one day be transporting blood samples to the KZU laboratory, documenting processes and providing entertainment. Sensitive and complex tasks, however, remain reserved for the health-care professionals. Marlies Petrig stresses that “Whoever needs care must be able to rely on it coming from people. Robotics plays a supporting role.”

Incidentally, even a robot feels the strain after a long shift. When Lio is low on energy, it goes to the charging station to dock and take a break.