

Vienna University of Economics and Business

Master Thesis

**Working Conditions in Corporate Elderly Care Homes
in Austria**

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Abstract

Across Europe, elderly care provisioning is under increasing pressure due to rising demand, without a commensurate increase in resources. In this context, large transnational, shareholder-oriented care chains are taking over significant parts of eldercare provisioning, leading to a corporatisation and related financialisation of eldercare in several European countries (Farris et al., 2024; Farris & Marchetti, 2017). In Austria, the population aged 80 and above is expected to almost double by 2050, resulting in a projected 120% increase of needed residential care workers by 2050 and a 280% rise in public net expenditures on residential care by 2050 compared to 2021 (Famira-Mühlberger, 2024). A pivotal moment in the development of Austria's eldercare landscape was the takeover of SeneCura by the French company Orpea/Emeis, marking the first major entry of a transnational, shareholder-oriented care provider into a system previously dominated by public and non-profit residential eldercare (Plank et al., 2023). Despite chronic underfunding, companies like Orpea/Emeis extract significant profits, making eldercare an attractive sector for investment, while bearing risks for the accessibility, quality and sustainability of eldercare provisioning (Plank et al., 2023).

Austrian eldercare workers across all institutions face understaffing, and heavy workloads (BMSGPK, 2021), as eldercare becomes increasingly economised and subject to cost containment (Dammayr, 2019). However, international studies link profit-orientation in eldercare provision to deteriorating working conditions and quality of care. Despite the growing presence of private corporate actors in Austria's residential eldercare, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring how corporatisation and financialisation affect working conditions, particularly from the perspective of care workers themselves.

This thesis addresses this gap by analysing the impact of corporatisation on (experienced) working conditions in Austrian residential eldercare, focusing on the case of SeneCura. Adopting a qualitative, exploratory case study approach, an in-depth analysis of care workers' experiences and two outside experts (a trade union representative and journalist) from SeneCura is conducted. This triangulated data offers a nuanced picture of the relation between corporate organisation and working conditions in Austrian residential eldercare.

The findings reveal that corporatisation influences working conditions through changes in management (e.g., restructuring, centralisation of decision-making, reduction of local managerial autonomy, destructive leadership) and corporate strategies (e.g., profit orientation, cost-cutting on material and staffing, and financial engineering). Care workers find themselves with increased workloads, intensified monitoring and documentation, and a workplace culture that sometimes suppresses criticism. Whilst the general economisation of Austrian eldercare

raises workloads across all institutions, corporate strategies and management dynamics can reinforce the burden on care workers. Despite these conditions, local managers' leadership style and the quality of teamwork were found to moderate pressure on workers and influence job satisfaction. While some experience a culture of intimidation and silencing criticism from their superiors, others experience support. Workers' responses to their situation ranged from individual resistance, resignation and frustration to collective engagement through works councils and trade unions, or assimilation and cooperation with the company. All care workers are committed to providing high-quality care, often going above and beyond the formal scope of their duties, taking on great responsibilities for their work, colleagues, the residents and their superiors. Thereby, they absorb corporate and financial pressures, which leads to heavier burden, while also contributing to sustaining the system of corporatisation and the under-resourcing of residential eldercare in Austria.