

KOBRA – A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO IMPROVING OSH IN CARE AND NURSING

Introduction

Home care constitutes an important part of providing care to individuals due to age, illness or disability, enabling them to remain in their homes while receiving professional care.¹ The nature of the work presents unique challenges to ensuring occupational safety and health (OSH) of home care workers, as safe and healthy working conditions are often harder to enforce in a home environment.² The lack of standardised safety measures and supervision can aggravate these risks and increase the likelihood of workplace injuries.³ While the demand for long-term home care in the EU is rising due to an ageing population and policy developments towards de-institutionalisation, the care sector faces significant challenges, including precarious employment, low wages and fragmentation due to outsourcing of public services, and the increasing share of the private sector in the provision of care services.⁴

The KoBrA initiative presents an interesting case of inter-organisational cooperation among the most important stakeholders in both stationary and ambulatory (home) care settings for improving OSH in care and nursing. Apart from desk research, this case study is based on one qualitative interview with two key representatives from KoBrA.

This case study is part of a research project⁵ carried out with the aim to provide an overview of research on the OSH of home care workers.

Description of the KoBrA initiative

Background



Source: Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW)

The *Kooperation Breitenumsetzung von Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (KoBrA), translated as 'Broad Implementation of Occupational Health and Safety in Care and Nursing', was established in 2007 in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. This regional initiative emerged from a pre-existing collaboration between two accident insurance providers: the Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *OSH in figures in the health and social care sector*, 2024. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/osh-figures-health-and-social-care-sector>

² Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW). (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege – Ergebnisse der KoBrA-Beratungs- und Besichtigungsstrategie 2018–2020*. Available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de>

³ EU-OSHA. (2024). *OSH in figures in the health and social care sector*.

⁴ EU-OSHA. (2024). *OSH in figures in the health and social care sector*.

⁵ The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/home-care-workers-comprehensive-overview-occupational-safety-and-health-risks>

Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW),⁶ which covers private care facilities, and the Unfallkasse Baden-Württemberg (UKBW),⁷ which is responsible for public institutions. Although these two organisations are the core facilitators of the network, the collaboration is further extended to include various other organisations, government bodies, trade unions and so on. The participation of these diverse stakeholders is strategically determined based on the specific needs and focus areas of ongoing initiatives, ensuring that relevant expertise is included for each project phase or thematic priority.

KoBrA was founded on the core principle that ‘good occupational safety leads to good care’. This principle recognises that the quality of care for patients is intrinsically linked to the OSH of care workers. The unique aspect of KoBrA lies in its broad, collaborative approach that extends beyond traditional occupational safety stakeholders to include organisations focused on patient care, thereby addressing both worker safety and care quality simultaneously.

The initiative was initially centred around the Risiko-Quick-Check (RQC) project,⁸ a self-assessment tool for occupational safety. Over time, KoBrA has evolved to address various challenges in stationary and ambulatory (including home) care by helping to improve organisational structure, workplace safety inspections, regular training, workshops and the integration of digital tools. The focus areas have shifted over the years to respond to emerging needs, including digitalisation in care, violence prevention and emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

Project structure

The KoBrA initiative serves as a platform for exchanging information to discuss the most pressing needs, providing guidance to network partners, such as on quickly changing regulations during the pandemic, highlighting good practices, presenting digital tools and understanding co-existing regulations among the involved stakeholders to help simplify administrative procedures. Apart from acting as a facilitator and platform of exchange, the KoBrA initiative implements its own activities and projects. The following are the main stakeholders involved:

Statutory accident insurance providers

- The BGW is the nationwide statutory accident insurance institution for non-state healthcare and welfare services in Germany, covering private care providers and facilities.
- The UKBW is the regional statutory accident insurance institution for public sector employees, students and other insured groups in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

Regional ministries

- Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism (responsible for occupational safety)
- Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Integration (responsible for home supervision authorities)

State-level inspection authorities

- Labour inspection authorities (*Gewerbeaufsicht*)
- Residential care inspection authorities (*Heimaufsicht*)

Health insurance

- Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse (AOK) (a major German health insurance company)

Medical services:

- Medical services (*Medizinischer Dienst*)

Care provider associations:

- Baden-Württembergische Krankenhausgesellschaft (BWKG) – Baden-Württemberg Hospital Association, which represents hospitals and also has connections to disability assistance facilities

⁶ More information is available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de>

⁷ More information is available at: <https://www.ukbw.de/>

⁸ Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW). (2021). Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege Strukturiert und wirksam durch die Gefährdungsbeurteilung! Ergebnisse der KoBrA-Beratungs- und Besichtigungsstrategie für stationäre und ambulante Einrichtungen 2018 – 2020. https://wm.baden-wuerttemberg.de/fileadmin/redaktion/m-wm/intern/Publikationen/Arbeit/KoBrA_Bericht_Arbeitsschutz_in_der_Pflege.pdf

⁹ Expert Interview (27 February 2025).

- Bundesverband Privater Anbieter sozialer Dienste e.V. (BPA) – A professional association representing private/independent care facilities
- Diakonie – A significant welfare organisation of the Protestant churches in Germany that operates many care facilities

Additional partners since 2016

- Trade Union: Ver.di (United Services Trade Union)
- Pension Insurance: German Pension Insurance Baden-Württemberg
- Medical Association: VDBW (Association of German Company and Occupational Physicians)

Additional participating organisations

- Scientific support: Fraunhofer IAO (The Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, applied research organisation), TU Dresden (Technical University of Dresden)
- Project management: Contec GmbH (business consulting company managing the project)
- Other partners: Verwaltungs-Berufsgenossenschaft (VBG) (another insurance provider), State Competence Center for Care and Digitalisation (added more recently)

The KoBrA initiative also includes an inter-institutional working group in its structure, including ministries, labour inspection authorities (state-level governmental agencies responsible for enforcing OSH regulations in workplaces) and accident insurance providers enabling comprehensive consideration of all stakeholders' interests. This working group receives scientific support from Fraunhofer IAO and TU Dresden, and the project is managed by the business consulting company Contec GmbH, which has proven effective in managing the interests of each partner.¹⁰

The initiative has organised seven KoBrA conferences over the years, with the eighth scheduled for Autumn 2025. The conferences serve as central platforms where project representatives and key stakeholders meet to exchange and share knowledge and experiences. The success of the previous events was evident in the positive feedback from participants and increased acceptance of OSH measures. Currently, the network is often present at regional care conferences, organised by regional-level stakeholders, such as municipal and district-level public sector institutions, regional offices of health and social insurance bodies, and local offices and representatives of trade unions like ver.di (German United Services Trade Union). KoBrA's presence at these regional conferences has further strengthened its reach and impact.^{11,12}

Results

Since the beginning of the initiative, the core KoBrA activities have involved developing new tools to address worker safety and care quality, conducting inspections, organising training sessions, conferences and supporting collaboration among the involved stakeholders. Below is an overview of key activities that have been implemented so far:

- **2007-2013:** Introduction of the *RQC*, later expanded as *gesund-pflegen-online.de* ('Healthy-care-online.de'), which provided an online tool for occupational safety self-assessment and offers prevention tips.
- **2007-2013:** Organisation of leadership training and knowledge-sharing events, including *Aufbruch Pflege vor Ort* ('A new beginning for local care') and *gesund-pflegen-online.de auf Tour* ('Healthy-care-online.de on tour').
- **Since 2013:** Establishment of regional networks to enhance cooperation between authorities, medical services and care facilities for improved OSH.
- **Since 2016:** Launch of digital risk assessment tools by the BGW and UKBW, alongside expert consultations and technical events.

¹⁰ BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (p. 34).

¹¹ Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW). KoBrA. <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/kobra>

¹² BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (p. 35).

- **2018-2020:** Implementation of a joint strategy involving ministries, labour inspection authorities, and the BGW and UKBW to improve risk assessments in the stationary and ambulatory (including home) care provider organisations.
- **2020-2021:** For the COVID-19 pandemic, the KoBrA network provided targeted information and developed infection control guidance and emergency safety protocols to support private and public care provider organisations.
- **More recently:** Increased focus on violence and aggression prevention, the impact of digitalisation in the care sector, and the development of resources to improve OSH in small-scale (in terms of the number of employees) providers of home care services.¹³

Development of digital risk assessment and prevention tools

One of the opportunities emerging from KoBrA is the improvement of risk assessment practices with the help of digital tools, which has shown improved performance in workplace risk assessment. Facilities that use the risk assessment tools from the BGW and UKBW demonstrate higher compliance with safety regulations. This is particularly evident in stationary care facilities, which achieved an average organisational safety score of 77.3%, compared to 56.2% in ambulatory care (including home care). This correlation is particularly strong in ambulatory care, where tool users show significantly better results in workplace indices and organisational indices. In stationary care, 93% of facilities have implemented risk assessments, and notably, 44% of these facilities achieved excellent performance across all measured indices, which included organisation, nursing workplaces, non-nursing workplaces and overall risk assessment.¹⁴ This high-performing cluster consistently achieved scores above 90% in various areas: 92% for nursing workplaces, 95% for non-nursing workplaces and 95% for process evaluation.¹⁵

Between 2007 and 2013, KoBrA introduced the *RQC*,¹⁶ an online self-assessment OSH tool. This tool was later integrated into the nationwide *platform gesund-pflegen-online.de* under the German Joint Occupational Safety Strategy (GDA). The platform offers a simple self-assessment mechanism, a comprehensive catalogue of preventive measures and a toolbox to support care facilities in enhancing overall workplace safety and health. It also offers information about events and workshops for managerial staff.

The 2016-2020 project run by KoBrA and focusing on risk assessment facilitated the nationwide implementation of the BGW's *Online-Gefährdungsbeurteilung* (Online Risk Assessment) and the UKBW's risk assessment programme. Since 2020, the digital tools have been continued and expanded, considering their success. The digital tools¹⁷ provide standardised frameworks for risk assessment and are supplemented by expert events and advisory services for care institutions.

Workplace inspections and advisory strategies

From 2018 to 2020, KoBrA implemented a joint advisory and inspection strategy in collaboration with the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism, trade supervisory authorities, and the BGW and UKBW. This initiative aimed to improve risk assessments in the care sector. A total of 388 care facilities were inspected, covering both stationary (232) and ambulatory (including home care) (156) providers. These inspections evaluated workplace hazards, regulatory compliance and the effectiveness of existing safety measures. Additionally, workplace violence and stress prevention have become a recent focus of the KoBrA initiative, as most care facilities (stationary and ambulatory) were unequipped to manage emergencies and provide training.¹⁸

Training, workshops and conferences

To increase engagement, over the years, KoBrA has organised multiple training sessions and informational events to equip managerial staff with the necessary knowledge to conduct risk

¹³ Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW). Über KOBRA. <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/kobra/ueber-kobra-bw-95158>

¹⁴ BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (p. 79).

¹⁵ BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (pp. 77, 79).

¹⁶ BGW. (2021). *Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege Strukturiert und wirksam durch die Gefährdungsbeurteilung!*

¹⁷ BGW. (2021). *Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege Strukturiert und wirksam durch die Gefährdungsbeurteilung!*

¹⁸ German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the Health and Welfare Services (BGW) (2025). *KoBrA Factsheet: prevention of Violence and Aggression*. <https://www.bgw-online.de>

assessments effectively. Between 2007 and 2013, the *Aufbruch Pflege vor Ort* ('On-site care on the move') and *gesund-pflegen-online.de auf Tour* ('Healthy-care-online.de on tour') events provided leadership training in OSH, featuring best practices, expert presentations and open discussions. The KoBrA projects hold yearly conferences centred around one chosen theme. The conferences are joined by key representatives and experts in the field. In 2022, for example, the leadership conference was organised to gain a better understanding of the burden and difficulties care workers face. In 2024, the conference's theme was the prevention of violence and aggression in the care sector. It was attended by approximately 130 specialists and managers from care facilities, as well as OSH experts.¹⁹ The conference covered questions on how violence occurs, what the potential reasons for it are, what form (emotional and physical) it takes, and how to support workers and patients in creating a safe environment by creating emergency response plans, introducing de-escalation training for staff, workshops, and increasing awareness on violence in the care sector among organisations and care providers.²⁰

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Since 2020, KoBrA has played a significant role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing targeted information and support for care facilities. This has included developing important guidance on infection control, offering resources to address emerging challenges and adapting preventive measures to meet the urgent needs of the sector.^{21,22}

Success factors and challenges

The KoBrA initiative had a significant impact on improving OSH in the care sector. Structured risk assessments, digital tools, and workplace safety and health training helped care facilities achieve better compliance with OSH regulations, increase awareness and readiness for tackling workplace hazards.

Success factors

The success of the KoBrA initiative can be attributed to several enabling factors. Its **long-term commitment since 2007** has enabled the fostering of strong, long-lasting relationships with key stakeholders. Regular interactions through working group meetings, conferences and regional activities have ensured continuous engagement and lasting impact. Two key representatives from KoBrA who were interviewed highlighted that the trust built over many years of collaboration has been fundamental to the initiative's effectiveness, enabling efficient work processes, honest communication and a strong foundation for future cooperation.

Another important success factor is KoBrA's **broad stakeholder network**, which brings together stakeholders from policy and frontline care. As a cooperative platform, KoBrA facilitates meaningful exchanges that help ensure legislation is grounded in practical realities. Additionally, the initiative's adaptability to emerging issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation and violence prevention, has allowed it to remain relevant. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, its well-established network proved invaluable in supporting the rapid exchange of information amid shifting health and safety regulations. The appointment of a staff member responsible for risk assessment showed positive outcomes in workplace safety as well as resulting in a high rate of completion of risk assessments, written documentation of responsibilities, organisation of risk assessment and systematic implementation of safety measures.²³ Employee involvement has been a key factor in KoBrA's success.

Finally, for successful implementation and transfer, interviewees noted the importance of **adequate financial resources**, a commitment to allocate the required time from participating organisations and

¹⁹ Koordinierungsstelle für Beratung und Arbeitsschutz (KoBrA). (2024). 7. KoBrA-Konferenz 2024 'Gewalt und Aggression in der Pflege: Verstehen, Vorbeugen, Bewältigen.' <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/kobra/7-kobra-konferenz-2024-rueckblick-110710>

²⁰ More information is available at: https://www.bgw-online.de/resource/blob/104930/e1409376dc81e04a97f60c0e5d5e171f/KoBra-Akt_Factsheet_Gewalt_2025_WEB.pdf

²¹ Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege (BGW). (n.d.). Über KOBRA. <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/kobra/ueber-kobra-bw-95158>

²² BGW. (2020). KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege.

²³ BGW. (2020). KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege (p. 79.)

demonstrating clear value to stakeholders. Finding motivated individuals willing to champion the approach was also identified as essential.²⁴

Challenges

Despite its successes, the KoBrA initiative has encountered several barriers. **Coordinating stakeholders with differing priorities** has proven demanding, as each institution operates according to its own core philosophy, leading to varied expectations and operating mechanisms. Technical and administrative barriers have also arisen, particularly in managing shared resources such as publications and websites. While both the BGW and UKBW offer risk assessment tools, they were unable to develop a joint tool due to their distinct national (BGW) and regional (UKBW) jurisdictions; similarly, no independent website has been established, with all information currently hosted on BGW's platform. Additionally, funding limitations have posed further barriers to the activity, as accident insurance providers such as the BGW and UKBW typically have better access to financial resources than health insurance companies, whose participation must be carefully justified within agreed project frameworks due to stricter funding conditions.

While the KoBrA network has had a positive impact on OSH, achieving overall better workplace OSH management and higher worker wellbeing than before, **the gap between stationary and ambulatory care providers** remains a challenge. Stationary care settings consistently outperformed ambulatory care providers, particularly in terms of organisational safety structures, formalised risk assessment processes and emergency preparedness. Ambulatory in-home care services face unique challenges that make implementing structured safety measures more difficult.²⁵ For example, a major issue is the standardisation of documentation and implementation of risk assessments. While 69% of stationary care facilities have put formal risk assessments in place, only 50% of ambulatory care providers have properly documented their risk assessments. Ambulatory providers also struggle with integrating digital OSH tools, as many employees work remotely and lack direct access to standardised reporting and monitoring systems.²⁶

One of the main challenges lies in the setting of home care services, which lacks **a controlled work environment**. Unlike stationary facilities, where safety measures can be standardised and enforced, ambulatory care workers operate in private homes, where conditions vary significantly. This inconsistency makes it challenging to implement and ensure safe, healthy workplaces with worker wellbeing in mind, as each home presents unique ergonomic, hygiene and emergency response challenges. Additionally, home care staff work alone, with little on-site supervision, immediate medical assistance, or peer support in case of workplace violence or accidents.²⁷

Violence in ambulatory care is difficult to prevent because while stationary care facilities have integrated emergency response protocols, home care workers remain vulnerable to aggression from patients, their families or external threats due to their isolated work environment. The lack of workplace support mechanisms and reporting systems increases the risk that incidents will go unreported. Integrating violence prevention tools and training in home care services can mitigate these risks.²⁸

Transferability

The KoBrA model demonstrates significant potential for transfer to other regions or countries. The interview participants noted that the basic structure and approach could be implemented in other German states.²⁹ The model's emphasis on collaborative networks could be adapted to different regulatory environments. A similar network is in the process of being established but has yet to reach the size and effectiveness of the KoBrA initiative in Baden-Württemberg. Its collaborative structure, use of digital tools, and engagement of public and private stakeholders can be adapted to different national

²⁴ Expert Interview (27 February 2025).

²⁵ BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (pp. 5-6, 31-40).

²⁶ Koordinierungsstelle für Beratung und Arbeitsschutz (KoBrA). (2020). *Results of the KoBrA Consultation and Occupational Safety Strategy 2018–2020. Annex 2: Overall Evaluation Results* (pp. 8-9, 11-14).

²⁷ BGW. (2020). *KoBrA-Bericht: Arbeitsschutz in der Pflege* (pp. 31-40).

²⁸ KoBrA. (2020). *Results of the KoBrA Consultation and Occupational Safety Strategy 2018–2020* (pp. 8-9, 11-14).

²⁹ Expert Interview (27 February 2025).

contexts, especially where care provision is fragmented. KoBrA's flexible approach to emerging issues, such as digitalisation and workplace violence, offers valuable lessons for broader EU application.

Several key factors emerged from the research as essential for successfully replicating and transferring collaborative initiatives. First, **sustainable financial resources** can incentivise stakeholders to work together. Second, a commitment to allocate the required **time** to the initiative is necessary, as successful implementation relies on the dedication of time to projects, meetings and related events. Third, the **engagement** of the stakeholders involved in the initiative, particularly their openness and willingness to allocate resources, is fundamental to fostering cooperation and generating mutual benefits. Finally, **leveraging existing relationships** significantly enhances the likelihood of success, with one example being the collaboration between core partners BGW and UKBW, along with their ties to regional ministries.

Authors: Fieke Margaretha van Dijk (Visionary Analytics).

Project management: Lorenzo Munar and Kate Palmer, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

This case study was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

Neither the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work nor any person acting on behalf of the Agency is responsible for the use that might be made of the following information.

© European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2025

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.