



Addressing the Crisis in Human Resources for Health

- *A shortage of human resources for health (HRH) threatens the health care delivery system in many countries, particularly in Africa.*
- *Promising practices to strengthen HRH include workforce planning, task shifting, strengthening HR information and management systems, promoting retention and gender equity, and establishing partnerships.*

HRH Challenges

Globally, there is a shortage of four million health workers. The situation is especially acute in Africa, which bears 24% of the world's burden of disease yet has only 3% of the global health workforce. Of the 57 countries that fall below the threshold density of 2.5 health workers per 1,000 people, 36 are in Africa.¹

The HRH situation varies by country, but challenges often include:

- Inadequate numbers or poor distribution of health care providers
- Absence or lack of use of accurate and timely data for HR planning and management
- A legacy of chronic underinvestment in pre-service education and in-service training
- Unsatisfactory work environments, often contributing to low morale and productivity
- Problematic health worker retention rates
- Mismatches between available worker skills and competencies and those needed to meet national health objectives
- Lack of professional HR managers and organizational leadership
- Unrealistic workloads and scopes of practice for available cadres of workers
- Weak HR management systems such as recruitment, hiring, deployment, performance management and supervision
- The threat posed to health workers by HIV.

Promising Practices to Strengthen HRH

Support workforce planning and rationalization: Workforce planning is an essential component of a comprehensive and coherent HRH strategic plan. The process of workforce planning routinely enables senior managers to scan and analyze HR data, determine relevant policy questions and make policies to ensure that health workers with appropriate skills are available when and where they are needed.

Facilitate task shifting: Policy, procedure and licensing changes to revise scopes of practice should be considered to allow certain cadres (e.g., primary- and community-level workers) to carry out job functions normally performed by other cadres.

Strengthen human resources information systems (HRIS): To ensure that the right health worker is in the right place with the right skills, managers need accurate HRH data. In a growing number of countries, ministries of health, licensing and certification bodies, private-sector organizations and other stakeholders are beginning to work together to develop a HRIS that tracks health professionals from training until they leave the workforce.



Improve HR management (HRM): It is important to strengthen HR Directorates in ministries of health and provide training in HRM skills to selected staff so they can become HR managers. Trained and experienced HR managers can play a vital role in establishing strong HRM systems that integrate the hiring, deployment, in-service training and development of health workers. With adequate training and proper authority, HR managers can also lead an organizational response to problems such as staff attrition, low morale and inequities in salaries, promotions and allowances.

Initiate Worker Retention Schemes: Keeping workers on the job is one solution to help alleviate shortages. The following approaches are being implemented in a variety of countries to address this issue: 1) trying out and evaluating financial and non-financial incentives; 2) developing clear and equitable career paths; 3) establishing psychosocial support programs, especially for providers of HIV/AIDS services; 4) ensuring that practices to address gaps in coverage respect personal circumstances and take into account safety concerns, especially for female workers; 5) improving work climate and creating a safe work environment; 6) offering continuing education and professional development.

Promote Gender Equity: Gender-based inequities in pay, deployment and career development opportunities, as well as issues related to sexual harassment and workplace violence, have significant negative impact on numbers, motivation and quality of health workers. Commitment to workplace-level implementation of international and national policy protocols can promote safe, equitable and supportive working environments for women and men.

Establish Partnerships: No single organization, sector or program can satisfactorily address all of the HRH challenges on its own. It is therefore imperative to establish viable and effective partnerships among stakeholder groups. The primary objective of these partnerships is to expand HR capacity to deliver HIV/AIDS and other health services through planned linkages among programs, sectors, non-governmental, community-based and faith-based organizations.

Expanding the HRH Knowledge Base

Awareness of the seriousness of the HRH situation is growing rapidly, with the 2006 *World Health Report* providing an added stimulus to focus attention on the issues. In a number of countries, results from many of the promising practices described above are being monitored to determine what works and what does not. The USAID-funded Capacity Project focuses on analyzing and addressing HRH issues and providing mechanisms to help share knowledge about results and progress, including a digital library of HRH resources: hrhresourcecenter.org. Based on the expanding knowledge base, if additional effort is dedicated to implementing and scaling-up promising HRH practices, it is likely that the severe worker shortages will be eased.

Where to get more information: www.maqweb.org

Reference:

¹ World Health Organization (WHO). Working together for health: the World Health Report 2006. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2006.

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