

Message from the Regional Director



Health systems all over the world are highly dependent on their health workers to provide skilled, effective, efficient and compassionate care. While the human resource is a strategic capital in any organization, it is more so in service-oriented organizations dealing with health care.

In most countries, the health sector is a major employer of human resources, with the wage costs estimated to account for 65-80% of renewable health system expenditure. Health workers are people whose primary interest is to improve, protect and maintain the health of people.

According to latest estimates, there are over 39.2 million health care providers in the world. Although WHO's South-East Asia Region accounts for 26% of the total world population, only 12.8% of those providers are working in the Region.

Current evidence reveals that coverage of health interventions, such as deliveries by skilled birth attendants and measles immunization, is higher in countries and areas with greater numbers of health workers. Estimates show that 2.4 health care providers (doctors, nurses and midwives) per 1000 population are needed to attain 80% coverage rate for deliveries. Although the South-East Asia Region has 2.1 health care providers (doctors, nurses and midwives) per 1000 population, four countries have less than one health care provider per 1000 population. There is also a direct relationship between the numbers of skilled health workers and a reduction in maternal, infant and child mortality rates.

In the context of the South-East Asia Region, migration of doctors began several years ago, particularly from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Recent studies indicate that out of the annual output of qualified professionals in medicine from India, 2.8% had gone abroad to work. Another study from Sri Lanka shows that, between 1993-2000, out of a total of 826 graduates, 22% (185) did not return from their postgraduate training abroad. Annually, approximately 200 doctors from the government sector go to work abroad from Bangladesh. While this has increased foreign exchange earnings, it is difficult to justify this migration, especially when the needs of the affected countries are not met. Therefore, there is a need to find ways of adjusting the movement of health professionals globally. Both, source countries and receiving countries need to develop comprehensive policies in support of skilled health workers.

The magnitude of health workers' shortage in the Region needs careful analysis. To mitigate this problem, synergies need to be developed through realignment of existing priority programmes, and preparing health workers for their changing roles in the ever changing global scenario.

In the current situation, a careful examination of the role of the health workforce can provide a better understanding of priority needs, such as the three health-related MDGs -- reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, which require robust health systems staffed with adequate health workers who have the relevant skills. However, lack of appropriate human resources remains the single most serious obstacle in implementing relevant health programmes to achieve these goals.

Furthermore, attending to disadvantaged populations, managing community-based, people-centered approaches, and responding to the emergencies of various types are indeed challenges to the health workers today.

The educational policy for health professionals should ensure that there are adequate numbers of graduates to support the health systems. Teaching health professionals should be student-centered, emphasizing the balance between institution and population-based interventions. An early exposure to clinical and field practice settings

WORKING TOGETHER FOR HEALTH

World Health Day is the annual flagship event of the World Health Organization. Since 1950, it has been held each year on 7 April to raise awareness of specific global health issues. This year's theme -- *Working together for health* -- highlights the challenging and often inspiring work carried out by health care workers.

All of us at some stage work for health -- a mother caring for her child, a son escorting his parents to a hospital, or a healer drawing on ancient wisdom to offer care and solace. It could thus be considered that health workers are all people primarily engaged in actions with the primary intent of enhancing health.

The multi-skilled public health workforce is characterized by its diversity and complexity. It performs multiple functions from management to health care, counseling or health education roles. It has people from a wide range of occupational backgrounds, e.g., public health personnel from medical, veterinary, dental, nursing, environmental science and other areas engaged in health improvement, health protection and health and social care. They may work as:

- public health physicians, dentists or veterinarians,
- epidemiologists,
- health managers,
- public health nurses,
- public health/sanitary engineers,
- environmental health specialists,
- occupational health and safety personnel,
- health economists,
- health educators,
- health promotion specialists,
- community health/rehabilitation workers, etc.

In recent decades, thousands of primary health care workers have been trained in countries of the South-East Asia Region. They are referred to by a wide variety of names - Community Health Workers, Village Health Workers, Village Health Guides, Family Health Workers, Family Health Assistants, Auxiliary Nurses, Auxiliary Nurse Midwives, etc. Member countries of the SEA Region vary widely in size and in the numbers of the public health workforce.

Source: World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2006>), *The world health report 2006 -- Working together for health*, Geneva, WHO.

will allow students to better understand the health needs of people in the community.

Greater efforts should be directed towards research for realigning the health workforce for better access to health services by the entire population. Responsiveness to psycho-social needs of individuals and communities, ethical-minded practice and professionalism beyond self-interest are the hallmarks expected of health workers. We should improve information for better planning of human resources to ensure improved quality of service delivery through an appropriate mix of health workers.

On World Health Day 2006, let us re-dedicate our efforts to "Working Together for Health" to improve the health of all people.

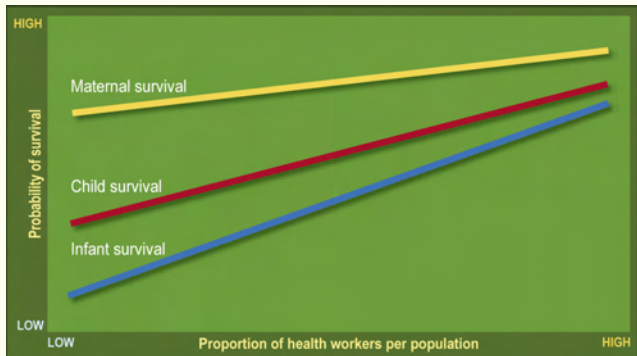


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World Health Day 2006: Highlighting the Human Resources for Health

Why is there a need to focus on the health workforce? Health workers save lives (see figure below). Without them, advances in health care cannot reach those most in need. Preventing and treating diseases require assessment, delivery and monitoring by health workers. Despite this, national health systems worldwide are finding it increasingly difficult to train, support and retain their health workers.

Health workers increase the survival of mothers and children



Source: World Health Organization (2006).

These problems are directly threatening global efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and to deal with dire health threats such as pandemic human influenza, epidemics of chronic disease, and disasters. In addition, shortages of health educators and trainers, support staff and managers, and the wasting of available resources are making a critical situation even worse.

There can be no doubt that there is a growing health workforce crisis in many parts of the world. The global population is rising, but the number of health workers is stagnating or even falling. This is especially true in places with the most serious health problems.

Across the developing world, health workers are facing economic hardship, deteriorating health infrastructures and social unrest. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has decimated health workers and patients alike. This has dramatically intensified the need to prevent HIV infection among the health workforce, and to provide antiretroviral treatment to those already infected.

In developed countries, a rise in chronic health problems among ageing populations has led to an ever-growing demand for health workers. This demand is increasingly being met by the active recruitment of trained workers from developing countries. This makes shortages of skilled human resources even worse in the poorest countries.

Health systems around the world are now facing a triple crisis of personnel shortages, low morale and fading trust. WHO estimates the current global health workforce to be around 59 million women and men. There are 39.5 million health service providers and over 19.5 million management and support workers.

THE HEALTH WORKFORCE

- There are 59 million health workers worldwide; an extra 4.35 million are needed urgently.
- The crisis: Africa is hardest-hit, but all health systems require more workers.
- Health workers have rights as well as responsibilities.
- Governments need to train, retain and sustain their health workforce.
- International cooperation must be strong and coherent.

It is estimated that there is a global shortage of more than four million doctors, midwives, nurses, pharmacists, dentists and support workers. The lowest concentration of health workers is in sub-Saharan Africa (see table below), where the greatest shortages are also found.

Decades of cost cutting and under-investment in health have also resulted in truly terrible working conditions for many in the health workforce. The morale and performance of overburdened, underpaid and unsupported health workers have sharply declined. As a result, many health workers feel they can no longer continue under these conditions. This has led to loss of health workers, deterioration of health services and erosion of public trust in the health system.

Solutions to these problems do exist, and new ones are being actively sought. Innovative and effective ways to educate, support and manage the health workforce, and encourage private-public partnerships are already reaping benefits.

In recent years, WHO and its partners have moved health workforce issues up the political agenda. The hope is that this will encourage all stakeholders -- policy makers, international donors, politicians, health professionals, academia, civil society, faith-based organizations, media -- to unite and work together to strengthen the health workforce.

Global health workforce, by density

WHO region	Total health workforce		Health service providers		Health management and support workers	
	Number	Density (per 1000 population)	Number	Percentage of total health workforce	Number	Percentage of total health workforce
Africa	1 640 000	2.3	1 360 000	83	280 000	17
Eastern Mediterranean	2 100 000	4.0	1 580 000	75	520 000	25
South-East Asia	7 040 000	4.3	4 730 000	67	2 300 000	33
Western Pacific	10 070 000	5.8	7 810 000	78	2 260 000	23
Europe	16 630 000	18.9	11 540 000	69	5 090 000	31
Americas	21 740 000	24.8	12 460 000	57	9 280 000	43
World	59 220 000	9.3	39 470 000	67	19 750 000	33

Data source: World Health Organization. *Global Atlas of the Health Workforce* (<http://www.who.int/globalatlas/default.asp>).

KEY MESSAGES FOR WORLD HEALTH DAY 2006

- 1. Educated and well-trained health workers save lives**
They are vital for providing access to disease prevention, treatment and care for all, including those living in extreme poverty.
- 2. Support and protect health workers**
Safe and supportive working conditions must be ensured, and salaries, resources and management structures improved.
- 3. Enhance the effectiveness of the health workforce through new strategies**
Enormous opportunities to achieve efficiency gains exist in many settings, and strategies must focus on the existing workforce because of the time lag in recruiting or training new health workers.
- 4. Tackle imbalances and inequities**
There are now widening imbalances and inequities in the availability and migration of health workers that seriously undermine the provision of fair and universal health care.
- 5. Governments must take the lead**
To make progress in all the above areas, governments must provide leadership in planning, formulating and implementing the required policies.
- 6. Promote partnership and cooperation**
Alliances of stakeholders within countries backed by global and regional reinforcement are needed to properly address the technical and political challenges of health workforce development.
- 7. Build trust among all stakeholders**
Trust between governments, employers, health professionals and the communities they serve must be nurtured and maintained.

Source: World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2006>).