

PanAfrica: Dire Healthworker Shortage

Health-e (Cape Town)

April 7, 2006

Posted to the web April 7, 2006

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The World Health Report 2006 paints a dire picture of massive healthworker shortages in poor countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa where the rich developed nations plunder the African health workforce.

Released today (April 7) on World Health Day, the World Health Organisation (WHO) report reveals that 37 percent of doctors trained in South Africa are working in either Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Portugal, the United Kingdom or America. South African trained nurses working in these countries made up 13 496 of a the local workforce of 184 459.

Both the South African doctor and nurse migration figures were dramatically higher than any of the other sub-Saharan countries.

The report also revealed that South Africa has 35 000 registered nurses who are either inactive or unemployed despite 32 000 vacancies. Many of these nurses are thought to be working in non-nursing occupations.

The report confirms that a serious shortage of health workers in 57 countries was impairing provision of essential lifesaving interventions such as childhood immunization, safe pregnancy and delivery services for mothers, and access to treatment for HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

According to the WHO more than four million additional doctors, nurses, midwives, managers and public health workers are urgently needed to fill the gap in these 57 countries, 36 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa.

WHO Director-General Dr Lee Jong-wook pointed out that across the developing world, health workers faced economic hardship, deteriorating infrastructure and social unrest. "In many countries, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has also destroyed the health and lives of health workers," he added.

The World Health Report sets out a 10-year plan to address the crisis. It calls for national leadership to urgently formulate and implement country strategies for the health workforce. These need to be backed by donor assistance.

Infectious diseases and complications of pregnancy and delivery cause at least 10 million deaths each year, according to the report.

Better access to health workers could prevent many of those deaths. The report shows clear evidence that as the ratio of health workers to population increases, so does infant, child and maternal survival.

At least 1,3-billion people worldwide lack access to the most basic healthcare, often because there is no health worker. The shortage is global, but the burden is greatest in countries overwhelmed by poverty and disease where these health workers are needed most.

Shortages are most severe in sub-Saharan Africa, which has 11 percent of the world's population and 24 percent of the global burden of disease, but only three percent of the world's health workers, according to the report.

The report quotes from South African research, where nurses working in maternal health services were asked about the most important characteristics of the workplace and presented with 16 theoretical workplace profiles.

The most significant finding was that nurses ranked good management, including clearly defined responsibilities, supportive attitude when mistakes are made and reward for ability not length of service, higher than improved salaries, unless the remuneration was dramatically higher.

A recent study from Cameroon, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe points to both push and pull factors being significant. Workers' concerns about lack of promotion prospects, poor management, heavy workload, lack of facilities, a declining health service, inadequate living conditions and high levels of violence and crime are among the push factors for migration.

Prospects for better remuneration, upgrading qualification, gaining experience, a safer environment and family-related matters are among the pull factors.