

Towards a global code of practice for health worker migration

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The international migration of health professionals is currently a topical issue and a significant item on the political agenda ⁽¹⁾. Movement of health workers from developing to developed countries is described to be associated with both positive and negative effects. However, when poor countries lose huge numbers of their precious health personnel to the rich countries, health system collapse is the inevitable result with severe consequences for health indicators and population health in those low-income countries. The term 'brain drain' is coined in the 1960s to describe such movement ⁽²⁾.

During the recent years, much is written on the description and analysis of medical migration in different contexts with several papers and reports documenting the situation and implications for countries and migrant health workers. However, attempts to resolve adverse effects of this migratory flow did not enjoy evident success to date with no clear approach to tackle the problem worldwide.

Experience and evidence has shown that migration from developing to developed countries is inevitable within the context of globalization and economic disparities. Building on that, most recommendations focus on 'migration management' as possible rational solution to the brain drain issue. Migration management, as a deliberate process to organize rather than prevent migratory flows, needs common understanding and collaboration between source and destination countries in addition to health professionals themselves. To observe the balance between the freedom of individual health worker to migrate and the right of people in developing countries to have

access to health workers, several codes of practice and ethical recruitment approaches were proposed and introduced. These codes have shown some sort of success and have encountered as well some difficulties due to their lack of legal power and their limited coverage among other factors.

The Health Worker Migration Global Advisory Council, operating under the auspices of the Global Health Workforce Alliance (GHWA) is leading an important initiative to introduce a global code of practice for health worker migration. The council, co-chaired by Hon. Mary Robinson, President of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative and Dr Francis Omaswa, Executive Director of the GHWA, is holding a series of meetings to prepare a framework for developing the global code of practice. The idea is to assist WHO member states to finally reach and agree on a Global Code of Practice for health worker migration. The Code will essentially be a statement of guiding principles, an outline of best practice and a commitment to ethical behavior in both recruitment and employment of skilled health workers ⁽³⁾. It should also stress reciprocal technical assistance and commitment to facilitating return migration from the side of destination countries. The Global Code is to cover both public and private sectors and stress the principles of global justice, personal autonomy, fairness and mutuality of benefits. Although the Code is not going to be legally binding, the global commitment and the international concern about effects of migration are factors favoring wide adoption of the Code.

During the last meeting of the Health Worker Migration Global Advisory Council in Washington

DC (web cast at <http://www.kaisernetwork.org>), it was agreed that a series of consultations be initiated to mobilize global support for the development and adoption of the Code. Members of the council will engage in consultations within their countries and relevant events will be utilized by the council to raise awareness and seek support for the Global Code. In addition, the Migration Council has established an electronic Community of Practice as a tool to exchange, communicate and share knowledge on the issue. It is hoped that all these efforts contribute towards addressing this complex issue of international migration of health professionals. The desired outcome is to ensure access for all communities to an able health workforce within functioning national health systems.

Please visit the alliance website at <http://www.who.int/workforcealliance> and Realizing rights at <http://www.realizingrights.org> for further details.

References

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