

Abstract

Master Thesis

For the Master of Science degree in International Health

Thesis Title: The impact of globalization on health care delivery –
an analysis of health worker migration from Southern Africa

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Year: 2014

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Key words: 'Globalization', 'health worker migration', 'brain drain', 'human resources for health', 'Southern Africa', and 'developing countries'.

Problem statement:

Southern Africa accounts for up to 33 % of the global disease burden but relies on only 2.8 % of the world's health workforce. At the same time, the number of migrant health workers increased by more than 5% per year over the last 30 years in many European countries. It is therefore important to understand the current magnitude, patterns, trends and developments of that health worker migration phenomenon and what policies and strategies could be used to address the problem.

Methodology:

For this critical literature review electronic databases were searched as well as the websites of relevant international organizations and philanthropic organizations, yielding 37 articles that were identified for inclusion in the review.

Findings:

The problem of health worker migration has dramatically increased over the past decades and thus exacerbating the crisis in human resources for health in already weak health care systems in Southern Africa. The problem has become more complex in its patterns and effects though and even while some positive effects can be identified, its negative impacts still prevail in terms of loss of skilled labor but also in terms of loss of government investment. The literature identifies a series of push and pull factors that explain why health workers are leaving their home countries. Current retention-oriented strategies try to address these factors by capacity building, financial allowances as well as non-monetary incentives. However, so far no successful policies could be implemented, and action from western recipient countries is needed.

Discussion:

Southern Africa has become the clear loser in term of welfare costs, as the few positive effects are overshadowed by the overwhelming staff shortages the migration of health workers brings to the region. Most of the international and domestic approaches that have been initiated to address the problem are insufficient, while at the same time there is still growing pressure from the main recipient countries to increase the supply of physicians from abroad into their own medical programs.

Conclusion:

The reviewed literature convincingly and almost unanimously demonstrates that in the light of globalization health worker migration is an ongoing and major problem of growing complexity and diversity in its patterns for Southern Africa. Most authors have identified advancements in human resource management as the most convincing short-term strategy for health worker retention. In the long term though, besides providing the necessary financial and technical support to strengthen human resource management capacities in the donor countries, only economic revitalization and debt reduction will make a real difference, and this will require major multinational cooperation, supported by international agencies.