NURSING MATTERS

Nursing Matters fact sheets provide quick reference information and international perspectives from the nursing profession on current health and social issues.

Nurses and Health Human Resources Planning

“The world has entered a critical period for human resources for health.”

Background

Planning the supply of and demand for human resources for health is a significant challenge for most countries. Workforce shortages, ageing workforce, underemployment and unemployment, skill-mix imbalances and geographical maldistribution are among some of the critical challenges at national level and within organisations. Health human resources planning (HHRP) is essential for countries and systems to ensure the presence of workforces capable of meeting the needs of populations. However, ineffective HHRP is a weakness found in many countries. Few countries have planning mechanisms in place that adequately predict future demands for health care and provide for an effective and efficient workforce.

The objective of HHRP is to provide the right number of healthcare workers with the right knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualifications, performing the right tasks in the right place at the right time to achieve the right predetermined health targets. HHRP comprises the fields of personnel efficiency (financial efficiency and productivity) and provider quality (clinical quality and patient satisfaction).

An effective HHRP can result in improved health outcomes, improved health services and a better functioning health system.

Causes and Consequences

The literature points to a number of key HHRP challenges/obstacles encountered by countries. These include:

- Unclear/poor planning policies, and poor support for strategic planning
- Lack of a national HHR plan or, in cases where they do exist, poorly executed or not implemented at all
- Lack of a national coordinating body for HHRP
- HHR planning which is performed independently and in isolation of other aspects of planning in the health care sector
- Inadequate resources and/or capacity to implement plan
- Focus on single profession (“silo”) -specific planning versus integrated approaches
- Focus on short term rather than medium and long term planning
- Limited consideration of the impact of social, political, geographical, technological and economic factors on HHRP
Lack of adequate and accurate workforce data and information
Lack of access to appropriate/suitable methods and tools needed to undertake the planning process
Lack of clear definitions of the functions and scope of practice for the numerous categories of personnel providing care
Poor communication and coordination between providers, planners, policy makers, employers, education and finance
The devastation of HIV/AIDS
Migration of healthcare workers from developing countries and
Chronic underinvestment in human resources

The consequences of poor HHRP can be critical to health systems. These include:
- Staff shortages; unmet demand for care
- Inequitable access to care
- Geographic, occupational, specialty and institutional imbalances in workforce
- Over qualification or under qualification in the workforce
- Mis-utilisation (including under /over-utilisation)
- High attrition in the workforce
- Unemployment or underemployment and
- Delayed response to meeting health care trends (i.e. new technology, procedures, etc.)

An effective HHRP has impacts on the following aspects:
- Improved health outcomes
- Improved health services and a better functioning health system
- Greater efficiency (both financial and operational/service) through better utilisation of resources and
- Improved retention and recruitment

Prevention and Protection

A good HHRP is characterised as follows:
- Undertaken by appropriately trained personnel
- Utilizes appropriate planning tools and methods
- Reflects an integrated human resources planning approach which is needs-based, outcome oriented and informed by service planning
- Takes into account the influence of social, political, geographical, technological and economic factors that impact planning and deployment decisions
- Considers the policy options for addressing imbalances in supply and demand
- Based on the health needs of the population
- Based on sound workforce data and information
- Involves health professionals in the planning process
- Involves ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the planning process
- Ensures effective and ongoing coordination among policy makers, planners, government, research and administrative stakeholders and
- Focused on the short, medium and long term needs

**ICN/ICHRN actions**
The International Council of Nurses and its International Centre for Human Resources in Nursing supports the following actions:

- Advocate for the development and/or revision of national workforce plans that reflect integrated human resources (HR) planning approaches; the creation of HR intersectoral planning bodies at national levels involving all key stakeholders; and investments in creating and maintaining HR data collection and information systems to inform policy and planning practices at the national level.
- Lobby for and help develop HR national minimum data sets.
- Work with others to strengthen strategic and technical capacities of individuals, organisations and systems to plan for human resources for health.
- Develop international competencies for nursing human resources planning and management.
- Develop and update guidelines for nursing human resources planning.
- Evaluate and disseminate good HR planning practices through presentations at meetings and other forums and through the ICN-ICHRN website and published case studies and eNewsletters.
- Present and discuss research and analysis of HR planning issues at international conferences, congresses and regional forums such as the ICN International Workforce Forum and ICN Asia Workforce Forum.
- Discuss key HHRP trends and challenges during Workforce Forum meetings.
- Explore nurses’ experiences in developing human resources planning and policies during conferences, congresses and regional forums.

Buchan described eight key principles for effective workforce planning. These are:
1. Ensure commitment to and involvement in the planning process by the main functions/stakeholders (e.g. finance, service planners, education providers, public/private sector employers), with clear lines of responsibility and accountability being defined.

2. Build from a structured information based on current staffing, staff budgets and relevant activity whether planning for a ward, organisation, region or country.

3. Assess workforce dynamics and “flows” between sectors and organisations within the system being planned for – assessing sources of supply and turnover.

4. Develop an overview analysis to identify need for and scope for change.

5. Develop and agree a set of planning parameters linking workforce and activity data.

6. Use “what if” analysis to model different scenarios of demand for services, and related staffing profile.

7. Develop an agreed workforce national plan which aggregates local/regional plans.

8. Establish a framework to monitor staffing changes in comparison to the plan – develop a cycle of review and update.

**Examples:**

**Africa: Sudan**
Sudan has faced civil war, political unrest and economic hardships for many years. In 2011, the country was divided into the Sudan and South Sudan. Therefore, Sudan had slow development in the health system. With the coordinated support of stakeholders, political commitment and the mobilisation of health human resources became possible. Newly opened educational institutions facilitated training, deployment and retention of healthcare workers. Within this framework, universal health coverage should be achieved.

**Asia: Nepal**
Researchers certify a number of human resources for health plans, strategies, policies and acts. But their status of implementation and their follow-ups remain partial. An effective HHRP is urgently needed, which offers comprehensive and up-to-date information about health care workers.

**Europe**
European researchers claim that current human resource planning strategies are focused on volume by ignoring aspects of quality in patient care. Therefore the RN4CAST project was conducted from January 2009 until December 2014. This study aimed to forecast the nursing workforce needs of 12 European countries and generate effective strategies in the management of human resources in nursing, including volume, quality of nursing staff and patient care. The objectives are generating new approaches for a more effective management of nursing in Europe.
North America: Canada
Comprised of national experts, researchers and involved policy makers in health human resources, the Canadian Health Human Resources Network (CHHRN) was established through federal funds. This network set the following goals:

- Providing access to the latest health human resource information
- Sharing and building a capacity of high-quality research regarding health human resource and
- Connecting experts, researcher and policy makers for supporting the development and implementation of high-quality and evidence-based health human resource policies.

For further information, please contact: icn@icn.ch

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.

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References


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