



South African Health Review 2018 Series

Chapter 2. Human resources for health and universal health coverage: progress, complexities and contestations

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- Adequate Human Resources for Health (HRH) is a critical requirement in achieving global universal health coverage (UHC) goals. The chapter draws on theories of the health labour market, and highlights the progress, complexities and contestations pertaining to HRH in South Africa since 2011.
- A health labour market is defined as “a dynamic system comprising two distinct but closely related economic forces: the supply of health workers and the demand for such workers, whose actions are shaped by a country’s institutions and regulations.”
- Positive HRH developments during the review period include: government’s commitment to developing HRH norms and standards; confirmation of a relatively strong health professional regulatory framework that provides a foundation for reforms; the publication of a major study on health professions education; and embryonic initiatives to develop HRH strategic plans linked to UHC.
- Weaknesses include: insufficient stewardship of HRH planning across the entire healthcare system; lack of a national integrated HRH information system, and inadequate information on overall HRH supply to address historical inequities; gaps in HRH governance; fragmentation, weak co-ordination and sub-optimal governance of health sciences education; and poor and ineffective operational management across all types of health facilities and provincial health departments, with rural provinces worse off than their urban counterparts.
- There is global recognition that HRH respond to policy and institutional changes, as well as to external forces, with increasing scholarly focus on the economic factors that affect the nature and size of the global HRH crisis.
- South Africa ranks among the top five countries in the Africa region in terms of density of physicians and nursing and midwifery personnel per 1 000 population. However, there are several reports of acute staff shortages in the public health sector in general and, in rural and underserved areas, in particular. Hence, the question as to the number of health professional categories needed in South Africa is a vexed one, influenced by the definition of need, the skills mix and scope of practice of different categories of health workers, resource availability, and the methodological approach used to determine need.
- Thus far, the National Department of Health (NDoH) has focused on the public health sector for the determination of norms and standards, and excluded the private health sector where the majority of highly skilled healthcare providers are located. Although the planned National Health Insurance (NHI) system may correct sub-optimal HRH stewardship across the health system, the current NHI Bill contains insufficient detail on this critical issue.

- The supply and quality of health workers are determined largely by the pre-service education of health professionals. A significant positive development during the period under review was the release of the consensus study by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) on health professions education.
- The ASSAf study provides evidence-based information and recommendations on the transformation of health professional education in South Africa to ensure improved population health. Despite some limitations in the approach, the comparisons between graduate output and public sector increase in this study suggest poor retention or absorption of newly graduating health professionals in the public health sector.
- Deeper health labour analyses are required to understand the economic forces affecting the supply and demand of the health workforce. Key recommendations include enhancing HRH technical capacity and expertise in the NDoH to provide strategic leadership and support for the entire health system; recruitment of public servants with the right skills, competencies, ethos and values; and the equitable allocation of resources to rural and/or underserved areas.
- The immediate short-term priorities for HRH in South Africa include developing an updated HRH strategic plan; incorporating urgent ASSAf study recommendations into this plan; exploring the development of an integrated HRH information system; developing norms and standards for the entire healthcare system; providing stewardship of both the public and private health sectors through appropriate and accountable governance structures; ensuring regulatory enforcement and oversight of health professional councils; addressing the uncertainty and gaps in policy with regard to mid-level health workers and community health workers; and monitoring implementation of legislation and key policies in provincial health departments.

SOURCE: Rispel LC, Blaauw D, Ditlopo P, White J. Human resources for health and universal health coverage: progress, complexities and contestations. In: Rispel LC and Padarath A, editors. South African Health Review 2018. Durban: Health Systems Trust; 2018.

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