

Voices of Health Policy Makers and Public Health Managers: An Introduction



Over the years since 1994, the emphasis upon achieving change within the health system has expanded from the arena of policy development to include a strong emphasis upon policy implementation. There is some consensus that many of the appropriate policies are now in place, and that a major challenge to improving our health system lies in overcoming problems with implementing these policies. Previous Reviews have attempted to analyse the reasons for these difficulties.



The following 5 chapters attempt to explore blocks to implementation from a slightly different perspective. The ‘voices’ chapters focus upon the experiences of those with responsibility for oversight, our elected representatives, and managers working in a variety of settings in the public health system, in an attempt to try to articulate some of the less tangible factors that impinge upon the policy implementation process. This approach is intended to achieve a different emphasis with a more personal and human feel, and provide for new and refreshing insights that cannot be found in the more traditional formal analysis.



The chapters are based on small-scale qualitative research undertaken for the Review. The findings provide a sense of some of the rewards as well as the frustrations experienced by those who have the task of ensuring that the quality of health care provided in the public sector improves. An overarching chapter attempts to draw out common themes from the interviews and to highlight their implications.



In addition to national and provincial elected representatives, four types of managers were selected for interviewing purposes:

- ◆ Senior Managers at national and provincial level
- ◆ District Managers
- ◆ Hospital Managers
- ◆ Clinic (Facility) Managers.



Permission to conduct the study and approach managers was obtained from national and provincial Departments of Health. Of the nine provinces approached, only one did not respond, and was therefore not included in the study. Research teams then approached individuals for interviews. Those selected were managers that consented to be interviewed and were available within the data collection period.

An overall profile of the parliamentarians and managers interviewed is provided below:

Table 1: Overall Profile of Health Managers and Parliamentarians Interviewed

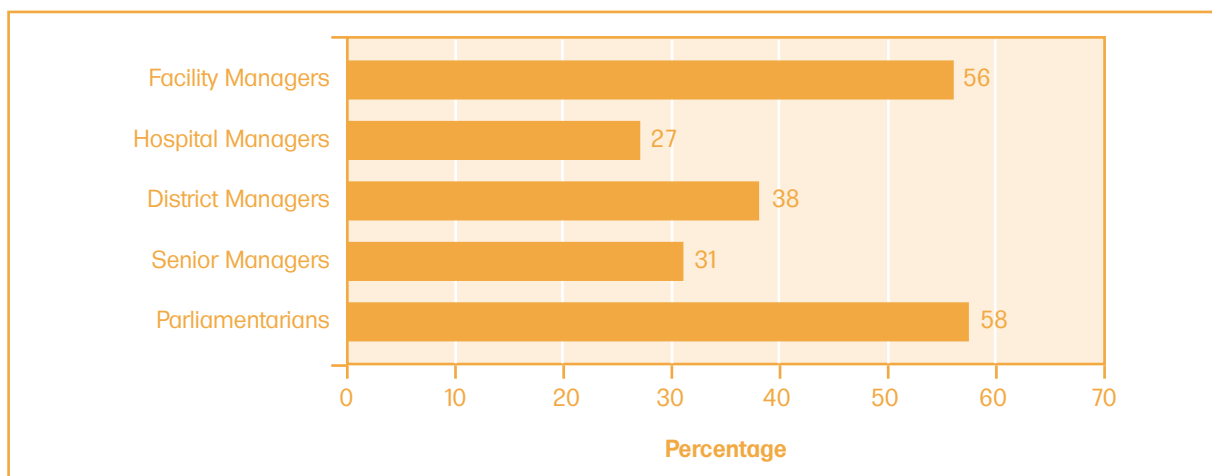
Profile Item		Facility Managers	Hospital Managers	District Managers	Senior Managers	Parliamentarians
Race	African	6	5	6	13	9
	Coloured	1	0	0	0	1
	Indian	0	2	0	0	1
	White	2	8	2	3	1
Age in years	< 30	0	0	0	0	0
	30-39	1	4	1	6	3
	40-49	3	10	4	6	5
	50-59	4	0	2	4	1
	60 or over	1	1	1	0	3
Gender	Male	0	10	2	5	5
	Female	9	5	6	11	7
Total interviewed		9	15	8	16	12

A self-administered questionnaire attempted to assess the job stress and work demands experienced by parliamentarians and managers. The three areas explored in the questionnaire include:

- ◆ The emotional exhaustion of the individual
- ◆ The degree of depersonalisation experienced
- ◆ The sense of personal accomplishment that is achieved.

All of those interviewed experienced only low to moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation in relation to their work.

Figure 1: Percentage of managers across the groups experiencing low levels of personal accomplishment





However, although only about one third of hospital, district and senior managers have a low sense of personal accomplishment, more than half of facility managers and parliamentarians experience low personal achievement.

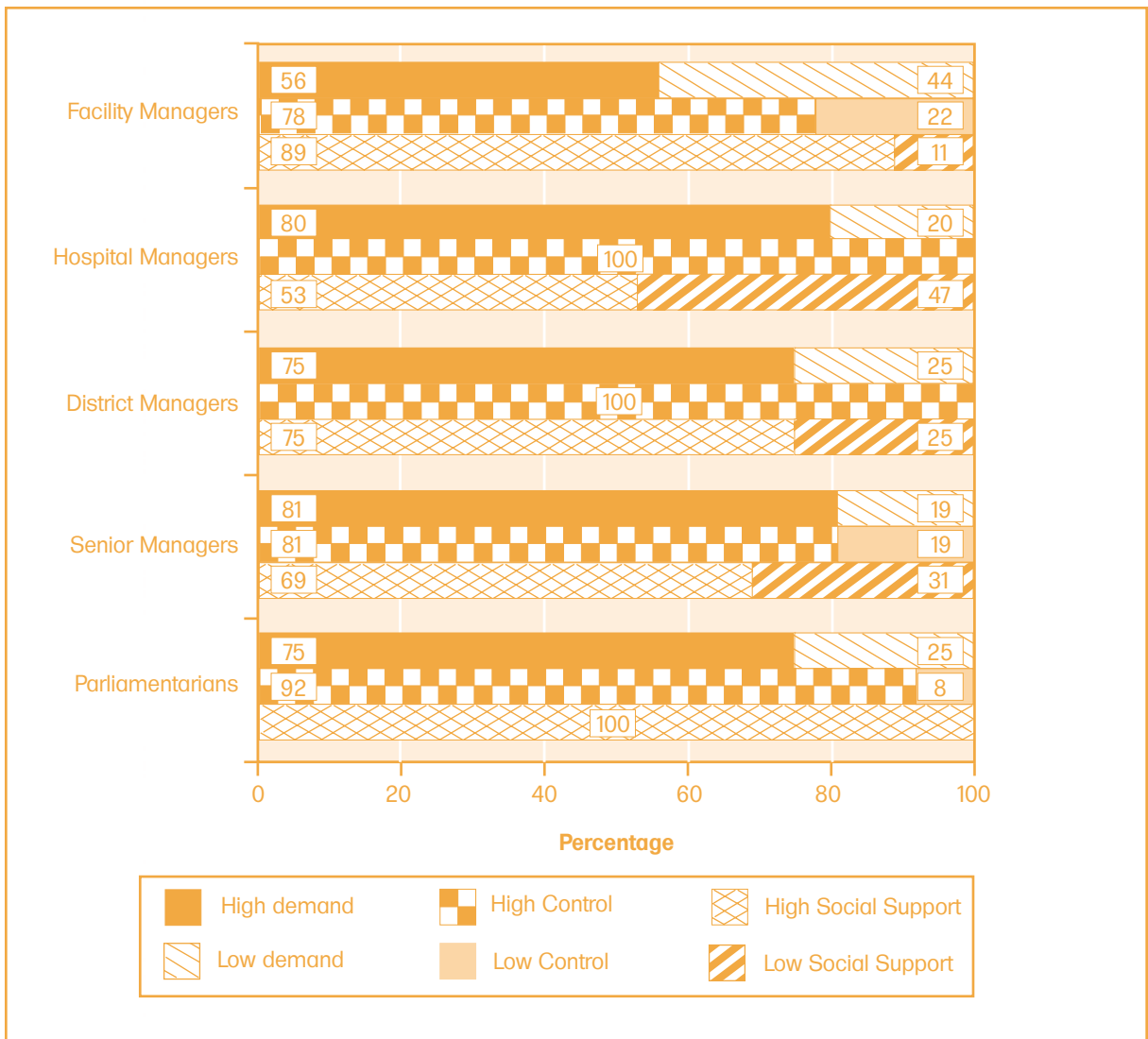
A separate questionnaire was used to assess the demands of work upon those interviewed. The three areas that it attempts to measure are:

- ◆ The demands of the job
- ◆ The control that an individual has in relation to the responsibilities of their job
- ◆ Social support at work.



Jobs that impose a great strain combine high demands with, low control, and low social support. Jobs associated with less job strain combine high control and high social support with moderate demands.

Figure 2: Job strain at work as measured by levels of job demand, control and social support





Even though all interviewees seem to indicate that the demands of their jobs are high, this is coupled with high degrees of control and social support. Thus, high job strain is not the norm. There are individual exceptions of course. One Facility Manager experienced high job strain, while a District Manager and two Hospital Manager indicated that they did not get any social support at work. Also, one politician indicated that they have little control at over their work.



The individual chapters outline the vision and motivation of those interviewed, their relationships with colleagues both above and below them in the hierarchy, as well as departmental leadership; and issues such as rules and procedures, and access to resources. Also, societal factors, in particular gender and race, and how these play themselves out at the different management levels, are briefly addressed.



It is important to emphasise that what has been obtained are insights into only parts of the health system as seen through the work experiences of selected categories of managers. These chapters in no way claim to provide a comprehensive or even impartial account of all managerial levels of the public health sector. It is fully acknowledged that interviews with, for example, heads of departments and local authority managers, or assessments by external management consultants, could lead to different themes and conclusions. In organising the material from the interviews, some level of interpretation on the researchers part is inevitable. However, no other material has been added and no attempt was made to reflect any views other than those of the managers interviewed. Also, while some attempt was made to capture experiences in a spread of provinces (both urban and rural) as well as different functions within health departments, no definitive conclusions about an individual health department can be reached on the basis of two or three interviews.

