

This year, World Health Day celebrates all the members of the health workforce who have always been and will keep on “Working Together for Health” to save lives and promote health of humankind. The health workforce includes both trained health professionals, such as doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, dentists, laboratory and other technical assistants, as well as non-health professionals working in health systems, such as managers, economists, accountants, information technologists and other administrative support workers. It also includes those individuals who have gained some health care knowledge and skills and volunteer to support health in families and communities.

The increasing demand for health, cost cutting, and underinvestment have resulted in overburdened, underpaid and unsupported health workers. There is a need for a closer look into the problems facing planning, education, training and management of health workers. There is a growing health workforce crisis in many parts of the world. Across the developing world, health workers are facing economic hardship, deteriorating health infrastructures and social unrest. In the industrialized world, with increase in life span and chronic diseases, there is a need for more doctors and health workers. This compounds the problem for developing countries, as more and more health workers are attracted to migrate from the developing to the industrialized countries. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, disparity in supply and demand, geographic maldistribution between urban and rural settings and imbalance in the number of different categories of professionals, represent another dimension of the crisis. Furthermore, even in the countries where ratio of health workers to population is high, the number of expatriate workers exceeds that of the nationals. This situation deprives these countries of a sustainable national capacity, an issue that should be addressed seriously in the long term.

Health systems around the world are now facing a triple crisis of workforce shortages, low morale and fading trust. WHO estimates the current global health workforce to be around 60 million women and men. It is estimated that there is a global shortage of millions of health workers. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, there are currently more than 2 million health workers, and the immediate need exceeds an additional 2 million workers. The development of human resources for health has consistently been a vital area for WHO’s collaborative work with Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region since its founding more than half a century ago. The Regional Office supported countries to develop capacities to produce health workers in priority areas through community orientation of education and strengthening of national planning and management.

An important issue that relates to the investment in human resources for health is allocation of additional funds by governments to the health sector as an investment in overall development. In this regard, WHO headquarters in collaboration with its six regional offices has produced a

global report entitled Tough Choices: Investing in Health for Development—Lessons from Developing Countries.

There can be no doubt, the changing roles and functions of health professionals in response to the changing health systems and population health needs demand continuous review, and reform of the process of human resources development.

“Health workforce in crisis”, the theme of this year’s World Health Day, marks the beginning of a decade that will be devoted to human resources development as a priority, by WHO and Member States, and the strategies and action that can be taken to address the various issues. I would like to call on all countries to invest more in this field and to make effective use of global, regional and intercountry cooperation and support in order to achieve the dramatic improvements needed in balance and efficiency of the health workforce.

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