

# Education: stepping up the intensity

Bryan Pearson introduces a special Education Review in this issue of *Africa Health*

The Human Resources for Health crisis in Africa is real, and the only long-term solution to it will be a scaling up of training opportunities coupled to the delivery of job satisfaction and adequate remuneration for those in post. The two options go hand-in-hand, not one before the other. The most expensive element of any health system is the salaries of its workers and unless governments recognise and act on this, then all the other initiatives are wasting time unless a conscious effort is being undertaken to export health workers (like nurses from the Philippines, doctors from Egypt). In many African countries there are unemployed doctors and nurses, unable to find a post because recurrent public sector expenditure is finite.

This special Review highlights some of the key issues. Education is multifaceted: community diploma or certificate, undergraduate, postgraduate, in-service refresher, continuing professional development certification – it encapsulates all. We start at the top end, the experiences of a post-graduate student in an overseas institution. We then swing the pendulum to the other end of the scale and look at a new vogue term – task shifting – and how this is bearing out in East Africa. Then we swing across to West Africa to look at the importance of in-service training in the retention of health workers, before finishing with a piece highlighting how international partnerships can share resources AND students.

*The World Health Report 2006: Working Together for Health* highlighted a worldwide shortage of almost 4.3 million doctors, midwives, nurses, and support workers. Thirty-six of the 57 countries with severe shortages are in Africa. Responding to this urgent crisis, the 59th World Health Assembly adopted Resolution WHA59.23 which recognised the ‘centrality of human resources for health for the effective operation of country health systems’ and called for the use of innovative strategies to maximise health professionals’ contributions.

This is of course meant to be entirely constructive though some readers in Nigeria might recognise the negative aspects of the professions recent mud-slinging over who was qualified to be the new Federal Minister of Health. Doctors claimed their superiority, whilst others fought their corner. Quite a spectacle. But of course what WHO meant was seeing the professions harness their experience, expertise and creative energies towards the overall improvement of care, not just their own corner.

In 2008, the African Regional Office of WHO adopted the following actions as key for every country: the formulation of comprehensive policies and plans for human resources development; advocacy for the creation of fiscal (budgetary) space for improved production, retention and performance of HRH; improved training, education, training and skills development; improved systems for management of human resources; the generation of evidence through information systems and research for human resources development; and finally, the fostering partnerships for human resources development. These orientations have been further validated by resolutions in 2006 which highlighted the fact that 36 of the 57 countries globally in crisis (failing to meet the minimum density threshold of 2.3 skilled healthworkers (doctor, nurse and midwife) per 1000) are in the African region.

The WHO African office targets are now: to have all member states adopt comprehensive health workforce policies and plans that are well costed, funded, and implemented to meet their National Health Service delivery priorities and targets based on the priority actions above. To advocate for mobilisation of partners and stakeholders at global, regional, and national levels for sustained resource (financial and technical) support to country level health workforce agenda within the context of health systems strengthening and health priorities agenda. To have all countries contribute to the Africa health workforce observatory website through their national observatories.

On the educational front, the focus is on supporting countries to help them strengthen their national education systems, including schools and universities, and to support the production of all types of health workers, with appropriate skills and competencies.

This should include the strengthening of accreditation mechanisms, better evaluation of training programmes in terms of relevance and capacity for scaling up production of healthworkers, the development of distance learning opportunities and the encouragement of twinning opportunities enabling the exchange of expertise with colleagues in other regions. Supporting and developing national continuing professional education schemes and last but not least, the strengthening of strategic management of fellowships.

*Africa Health* will continue to focus on all of these aspects. Contributions of best practice are welcomed.