

Editorial

Throughout the Health Sector: Communication Must Influence and Engage

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As we are midway through this decade, there have been myriad proclamations to address the challenges presented as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDGs principally target the major poverty-linked diseases devastating poor populations, focusing on maternal and child health care and the control of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Similarly, other burgeoning global health burdens are beginning to also garner interest: namely chronic diseases. These consist of cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, cancers, injuries, and neurological and psychological disorders, affecting rich and poor populations alike. And, of course, health crises – epidemics, natural disasters and conflict recur at unexpected intervals.

With these ideals, large programs are often put in place to try to tackle the causes of the ill health in developing countries. Many of these have considerable funding. Yet, the bottleneck hindering success is not the finance, but the lack of human resources. The latest World Health Report – *Working together for health* contains an expert assessment of the current crisis in the global health workforce and ambitious proposals to tackle it over the next ten years, starting immediately. The report reveals an estimated shortage of almost 4.3 million doctors, midwives, nurses and support workers worldwide. The shortage is most severe in the poorest countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where health workers are most needed. This means that 57 countries have critical shortages of workers.

The focus on health workers as the foundation of public health and addressing the dearth of health workers at all stages is paramount. Years of under-investment in health in general, along with the ravage of infectious disease and migration, now leave many countries with critical shortages. Further population distribution with professionals and health facilities in urban rather than suburban and rural areas raises more considerations.

The WHO's technical mandate and policy prowess should help raise the issue for capacity building in health. Health care is a labor-intensive service industry. Health service providers are the personification of a system's core values – they heal and care for people, ease pain and suffering, prevent disease and mitigate risk – they are the human link that connects knowledge to action.

The World Health report defines health workforce pragmatically: It includes all paid workers employed in organizations or institutions whose primary intent is to improve health as well as those whose personal actions are primarily intended to improve health but who work for other types of organizations.

Of course, those of us in health communication appreciate the “communication” as an element that enhances health outcomes, focuses resources for ethical health

delivery, and provides people with the ability to make decisions that affect personal, family, community, and global. A goal in health communication should go beyond the limitations of providing quality information and systems to health workers as suggested in the report. Our larger goal is to engage and influence the health sector or health policy. If the report accurately shows the human resource limitations on the health workforce, the communication imperative for a well-informed and developed health sector ought to be even a larger goal. The WHO definition of the health sector offered in the *Global Health Sector Strategy for HIV/AIDS 2003–2007*, challenges health communicators to influence and engage in a variety of places:

“The health sector is wide-ranging and encompasses organized public and private health services (including those for health promotion, disease prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care); health ministries; nongovernmental organizations; community groups; and professional associations; as well as institutions which directly input into the health care system (e.g., the pharmaceutical industry, and teaching institutions).”

As the moral and value implications of health ought to trump other sectors for adding long-term value and real “wealth” (the health is wealth slogan) than we should be even more concerned with the implications of this World Health Report and address the exigency for the health of the planet’s human population.