Understanding and Addressing Healthcare Workforce Shortages

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Like many laboratory and health managers, I am concerned about the shortage affecting our health forces and I therefore wanted to write this short article to guide reflection on this subject.

Health systems worldwide rely fundamentally on the presence and performance of health workers. They are the pillars upon which the structure of health services is built, and their availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality directly influence the attainment of the highest standards of healthcare. However, a looming crisis threatens this foundational aspect of healthcare systems: a shortage of healthcare workers.

Projections from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate an estimated deficit of 10 million health workers by 2030, predominantly affecting low- and lower-middle-income nations. But this scarcity is not confined to specific economic tiers; it extends across various nations, each grappling with distinct challenges in the education, employment, deployment, retention, and efficacy of their healthcare workforce.

The genesis of this enduring scarcity can be traced to chronic underinvestment in health worker education and training, resulting in a mismatch between educational strategies and population needs. Moreover, the intricate issue is compounded by the inability to deploy healthcare workersto rural, personnel might seem like a straightforward solution. However, healthcare, being a complex system, demands a nuanced approach.
healthcare workforce shortages, it’s imperative to pivot from a problem-centered approach towards a solution-oriented perspective that accounts for multifaceted dimensions.

The dilemma of healthcare workforce scarcity is not limited to its impact on the health system alone; it also intertwines with societal disparities. A myopic focus on managing workforce shortages might inadvertently exacerbate inequalities and create further challenges for certain segments of society.

Furthermore, as healthcare organizations strive for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, they often overlook the needs and well-being of healthcare professionals. Issues such as burnout, stress, and work-life balance are frequently sidelined, potentially impeding long-term workforce planning and management.

The solution demands a holistic approach. Prioritizing quality primary care and ensuring equitable access to healthcare should be central to workforce policies. It necessitates a reevaluation of working conditions, rights, opportunities for advancement, and the creation of a sustainable equilibrium between personal and professional life for healthcare workers.

Despite the recognition of these priorities in global policies, the execution of interventions still lacks the promise of substantial and enduring change. The persistent question prevails: Are we attempting to solve these problems with the same mindset that contributed to their creation?

We might have several options to prevent the shortage of such precious resources and the following figure highlights five of them:

1. **Adopt Flexible Care Models and Expand Telehealth**
   - Health organizations should embrace and expand telehealth and other virtual care solutions. This flexibility enables patients to receive treatment remotely, reducing the necessity for in-person visits to formal healthcare settings like hospitals. By enhancing and promoting virtual care options, healthcare systems can ease the burden on in-person facilities and the associated need for additional on-site healthcare staff.

2. **Invest in Advanced Technology and Analytics**
   - Prioritize investment in technology to enhance healthcare productivity. This includes utilizing digital tools and analytics not just for patient care but also for workforce management. Implementing systems to track workforce, patient volumes, and other relevant factors can optimize resource allocation and productivity, allowing organizations to achieve more efficient outcomes with existing staff.

3. **Improve Work Environment and Recognition**
   - To attract and retain healthcare talent, hospitals and health systems must enhance the employee value proposition. This involves creating a conducive work environment by reducing administrative burdens, providing recognition for exceptional care, and improving recruitment, retention, and promotion strategies. A key aspect is ensuring competitive pay, which is crucial for talent retention.

4. **Embrace Low-skilled Care Assistants with Clear Regulation**
   - Utilize low-skilled care assistants as a cost-effective human resource strategy to alleviate healthcare worker shortages. However, it’s imperative to establish clear regulations, role assignments, and governance mechanisms for this unlicensed assistive workforce. Clarity in characterizing, utilizing, and regulating these roles can significantly contribute to reducing the risks of rationing or subservient care.

5. **Systemic Transformation and Ongoing Investment in People**
   - Health systems need to undergo a fundamental transformation in how care is delivered. Redesigning work processes, workflows, and collaboration strategies should be central to this transformation. However, these efforts must be complemented by continuous investments in people and rebuilding trust in leadership. A systemic approach that targets organizational and systemic factors contributing to burnout and shortages is crucial for long-term success.
In conclusion, the shortage of healthcare workers in laboratory medicine necessitates a paradigm shift in approach—one that transcends mere problem identification and delves into comprehensive, sustainable solutions that prioritize the needs of both citizens and healthcare professionals. Only by reshaping perspectives, policies, and practices can healthcare systems globally navigate this pressing challenge and secure a robust, resilient workforce for the future.

References

1. https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-workforce#tab=tab_1