



Task Shifting: The Solution for Healthcare Worker Shortages?

Tuesday, 26 May 2008
16:00-17:30
International Conference Centre Geneva
Room 4

Session Outline

Health workers are "all people engaged in actions whose primary intent is to enhance health" (World Health Report 2006). Included are those who promote and preserve health as well as those who diagnose and treat disease. Also included are health management and support workers – those who help make the health system function but who do not provide health services directly.

There is a clear correlation between the population density of health care providers and the levels of coverage attained with essential health interventions, such as immunization and skilled attendance at delivery. But many countries lack the human resources needed to deliver these interventions.

WHO: "The causes of these shortages are manifold. There is a limited production capacity in many developing countries as a result of years of underinvestment in health education institutions. Moreover, the training output is poorly aligned with the health needs of the population. There are also "push" and "pull" factors that encourage health workers to leave their workplaces, mainly related to unsatisfactory working conditions, low salaries, and poor career opportunities. The migration of health workers to developed countries has dire consequences for the health systems in developing countries, which are already suffering the effects of years of neglect, poorly managed health care reforms and economic stagnation. Addressing this global crisis requires working in partnership and across sectors, actively engaging all stakeholders to implement and monitor effective strategies and policy interventions to develop a well-performing health workforce."

One way of addressing the workforce shortage is task shifting. The buzzword "task shifting" is the give to a process of delegation whereby tasks are moved, where appropriate, to less specialised health workers.

In this parallel session a number of examples will be presented, all of them revolving around task shifting and the health workforce crisis. The ensuing discussion will be dealing with the following questions:

1. How does task shifting fit into other solutions of the health workforce crisis?
2. Whose tasks are really shifted? And to whom? And at what level?
3. What about task shifting and PHC?
4. Is task shifting a panacea or is it a risk?