
EDITORIAL

“The health workforce is the beating heart of any health system”

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The health workforce is the beating heart of any health system. This issue of *Panorama* highlights the critical role that health workers play in ensuring the sustainability and resilience of health systems and a high quality of services in the WHO European Region. Without properly educated, skilled, motivated and managed human resources, universal health coverage is not attainable.

Sustainability of the health workforce is a key agenda item at the 67th session of the Regional Committee for Europe, to be held on 11–14 September 2017. Member States, international partners and other stakeholders will have the opportunity to consider how best to make further progress in the Region, with reference to a proposed framework for action on health workforce sustainability.

Workforce change and health system reform are interdependent, but system strategy must give the overall direction. In the European Region, Health 2020 sets out the required strategic changes for health services: adoption of inclusive models of health care; a people-centred approach; reorientation of health systems towards a collaborative primary care approach, built on team-based care; and realization of the potential for technological innovation through fully functioning and integrated national health information systems, which includes the delivery of electronic health-related information, resources and services (eHealth). These key components will be reinforced in June next year at a conference in Estonia to mark the tenth anniversary of the Tallinn Charter.¹

Member States can only achieve these changes with a transformed and sustainable health workforce. In turn, this requires effective policy action across various sectors, including health, social care, welfare, education, finance, labour and foreign affairs. Intersectoral processes must engage the public and private sectors, civil society, trade unions, health worker associations, regulatory bodies and educational and training institutions.

¹ The Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2008 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Health-systems/health-technologies/publications2/2008/tallinn-charter-health-systems-for-health-and-wealth-2008>, accessed 27 July 2017).

By setting out new evidence emerging from within the Region, this issue of *Panorama* helps shed light on the critical “how” and “what” questions: how can workforce sustainability be achieved and what is the Region’s vision of the workforce needed in 2030?

The Regional Committee’s approach to achieving a sustainable health workforce aligns with recent global human resources for health strategic developments, in which WHO and Member States in the European Region played a leadership role, and which helped shape the development of the framework: the *Global strategy on human resources for health: Workforce 2030*² and the report of the United Nations High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth.³ In combination, these provide a unique opportunity for a paradigm shift in health workforce policy.

What the Region is witnessing, and helping shape and direct, is a necessary shift in focus, from regarding the health workforce as a cost (and often a “problem”) to understanding that investment in the workforce will have a positive return in terms of the health, wealth and well-being of Member States. This will require national leadership and strong political commitment, as well as effective partnerships and cooperation among organizations, sectors and countries, if the workforce heart is to keep beating strongly in the Region.

² Global strategy on human resources for health: Workforce 2030. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016 (http://www.who.int/hrh/resources/pub_globstrathrh-2030/en/, accessed 27 July 2017) – primarily aimed at planners and policy-makers of WHO Member States, its contents are also of value to all relevant stakeholders in the health workforce area.

³ Working for health and growth: investing in the health workforce. Report of the High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016 (<http://www.who.int/hrh/com-heeg/reports/en/>, accessed 27 July 2017).