

# Editorial Note on Healthcare Professionals

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## Editorial Note

The healthcare industry includes establishments ranging from small-town private practices of physicians who employ only one medical assistant to busy inner-city hospitals that provide thousands of diverse jobs. In 2008, around 48 % of non-hospital healthcare establishments employed fewer than five workers. In contrast, 72 % of hospital employees were in establishments with more than 1,000 workers.

Health professionals play a central and critical role in improving access and quality health care for the population. They provide essential services that promote health, prevent diseases and deliver health care services to individuals, families and communities based on the primary health care approach. Mechanisms for optimizing the strengths and skills of health professionals will be essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

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 recognized the "centrality of human resources for health for the effective operation of country health systems" and called for the use of innovative strategies to maximize health professionals' contributions.

### Through networks and partnerships, WHO will:

- Support Member States to maximize the contributions of health professionals through interprofessional education and collaborative practice.
- Provide technical guidance and develop policy options and tools for enhancing health professionals contribution to health systems strengthening through the primary health care approach.
- Map the international and regional health professional networks that have the capacity to support global health initiatives.
- Link health professionals worldwide through virtual communities of practice so they can inform effective policies and promote successful practices.

- Support the maintenance and development of professional competencies through continuing education to ensure health professionals are equipped to provide the best care possible

### Recent developments

In the rapidly changing healthcare industry, technological advances have made many new procedures and methods of diagnosis and treatment possible. Clinical developments, such as infection control, less invasive surgical techniques, advances in reproductive technology, and gene therapy for cancer treatment, continue to increase the longevity and improve the quality of life of many Americans. Advances in medical technology also have improved the survival rates of trauma victims and the severely ill, who need extensive care from therapists and social workers as well as other support personnel.

In addition, advances in information technology have a perceived improvement on patient care and worker efficiency. Devices such as hand-held computers are used record a patient's medical history. Information on vital signs and orders for tests are transferred electronically to a main database; this process eliminates the need for paper and reduces recordkeeping errors. Adoption of electronic health records is, however, relatively low presently.

Cost containment also is shaping the healthcare industry, as shown by the growing emphasis on providing services on an outpatient, ambulatory basis; limiting unnecessary or low-priority services; and stressing preventive care, which reduces the potential cost of undiagnosed, untreated medical conditions. Enrollment in managed care programs predominantly preferred provider organizations, health maintenance organizations, and hybrid plans such as point-of-service programs continues to grow. These prepaid plans provide comprehensive coverage to members and control health insurance costs by emphasizing preventive care. Cost effectiveness also is improved with the increased use of integrated delivery systems, which combine two or more segments of the industry to increase efficiency through the streamlining of functions, primarily financial and managerial. These changes will continue to reshape not only the nature of the healthcare workforce, but also the manner in which healthcare is provided.

Various healthcare reforms are presently under consideration. These reforms may affect the number of people covered by some form of health insurance, the number of people being treated by healthcare providers, and the number and type of healthcare procedures that will be performed.

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