The Surgical Workforce Shortage – A Global Crisis

Summary

Human resources are at the core of any health care system, and a robust health workforce is essential for the advancement of health worldwide. This labor force consists of a multidisciplinary team, including but not limited to physicians, surgeons, nurses, community health workers, clinical officers, technicians, laboratory specialists, managers and countless others. Currently, there is a severe shortage of healthcare workers in low- and middle-income (LMICs) across the globe. This deficit is only projected to worsen unless significant investment is made to strengthen the health workforce. Sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to 11% of the world’s population, has 24% of the total global burden of disease but only 3% of the global health workforce.¹

Global Workforce Shortage

The shortage of specialist providers is even more alarming. Only 12% of the surgical, anesthesia, and obstetrical specialist workforce practice where over one third of the world’s population lives.² In Sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than 50% of births in the region are attended by skilled personnel.³ In this region, there are less than 1% the number of surgeons than in the United States, despite having a population three times as large.⁴ It is known that increasing the density of health workers improves outcomes. For every 10-unit increase in the density of surgeons, anesthesiologists, and obstetricians per 100,000 people, the maternal mortality rate decreases by 13%.²

Currently, there is a shortage of 1 million surgical, anesthesia, and obstetric specialists in LMICs. By 2030, it is estimated that this workforce must double to sustain the maintain status-quo, let alone account for increases needed to address the unmet burden of surgical disease.² Achieving this objective will require creative strategy and collaborative efforts to combat the diverse challenges in developing a strong health workforce.

Workforce2030

In May 2016, the World Health Assembly adopted the first-ever global strategy on human resources for health, called Workforce 2030. The aim is to identify ways of developing a global health workforce capable of achieving the SDGs, including those related to health, as well as generating employment and advancing inclusive economic growth. The Frontline Health Workers Coalition (FHWC) and IntraHealth International have been central in advocating for this effort, which represents a further step towards a coordinated workforce strategy.

On September 21, 2016, during an event hosted by the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development launched a report from the UN High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth to the UN Secretary-General, outlining a strategy that sets out a series of milestones by 2020 and 2030 to achieve the vision of equitable access to health workers within strengthened health systems and thus accelerating progress towards universal health coverage and the SDGs.

Call to Action

Considerable investment in human resources, including surgical care providers, will be essential if we are to be successful in achieving the ambitious targets set in the SDGs. We call for greater recognition of the important contribution of surgical care providers to a robust and sustainable workforce.
References:
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