



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## **The search for HR continues: WHO's General Programme of Work 2002–2005 and the World Health Report 2001 on Mental Health**

Sir:

It is time, once again, for our annual search for HR (human resources) as a potential area of interest at the World Health Organization. *But this year my comments appear as a letter, not as a book review, because the annual World Health Report was not distributed during the World Health Assembly, last May.*

I've observed previously that since the demise of the "Report of the Director General" in 1994 "The World Health Report", which took its place, was always available, like its predecessor, on the occasion of the World Health Assembly. This coincidence stopped, for the first time, in 2000, with one month delay in order to celebrate, I was informed, the anniversary date of the WHO Constitution.

In that report, the rank order of countries, placing France as first in "overall health system performance" and the USA as 37th, drew the attention of member states. In January 2001, an Executive Board Resolution (EB 107.R8) asked the Director General "to ensure that each member state is consulted on the best data to be used for assessing health system performance, and is provided with advance information on the indicator values that WHO obtains using these data" and "to ensure they receive the reports before they are made available to the general public". One can never be too careful.

As decided by the Director General, the 2001 World Health Report shall be available on October 4th. I am not officially informed why this precise date was selected, but it sure is a nice way to avoid controversy during the General Assembly.

When it becomes available, I will let you know if I find anything in the report concerning HR. In the meantime, last May, during the General Assembly I found that a short document,<sup>1</sup> entitled *General Programme of Work 2002–2005*, was distributed to the delegates.

I searched for HR. The clear and concise text draws our attention to "the changing causes of ill-health", to the fact that "Health systems are becoming more complex" and that "conflicts and natural disasters" have a negative impact, requiring "complex emergencies" (sic) with "more dynamic and less bureaucratic approaches to management". We are reassured to learn that

WHO intends to “reduce excess mortality”, “promote healthy lifestyle” and “develop health systems ( . . . ) responding to people’s legitimate demands”. In order to do that, WHO’s Secretariat shall “articulate advocacy positions”, “manage information”, provide “technical support”, “set standards” and “test new technologies” in relation to identified priorities: malaria, TB, HIV, cancer, CVD and diabetes, tobacco reduction, maternal and mental health and “health systems”.

Until page 9 out of 10 I remained panting for our elusive HR. But there it was, hidden under the word “workforce” (in original English version, happily translated in the French text as “*Ressources Humaines*”). The brief message is clear: “Workforce management is a neglected area in many health systems and needs a more comprehensive approach”. Bravo!

In 2006, at the end of this 3-year General Programme of Work, we will discover what was done to redress this un(dis)covered, neglected area.

Notwithstanding my failing old-age memory I vaguely remember that, 35 years ago, when I landed in the Brazzaville (PR Congo) WHO regional office for Africa, my attention was drawn to the very same neglected area. And now I cry thinking about my own failure at improving it while I was in charge.

Now, for the sake of the world’s population, I sincerely wish the best of luck to my successors.

## Note

1. GPW/2002-2005. Original English, no ISBN number. 10 pages, just over 2000 words, no charge.

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