

EDITORIAL

Workforce Development and Distribution

The November 2005 meeting of the Network: Towards Unity for Health (TUFH), in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, addressed the theme of “Making Primary Health Care Work: Challenges for the Education and Practice of the Health Workforce”. This theme was reflected in many of the sessions, discussions, and directions of the conference, including taskforce activities related to “Integrating Medicine and Public Health” and “Interprofessional Education”.

As new editors to *Education for Health*, we are struck by the continued importance, and persistence, of the joint challenges of workforce development and distribution. As briefly discussed in the Editors’ Notes section of this issue of *Education for Health*, both access to and quality of health care are critical elements in health disparities reduction. The two elements operate hand-in-hand. Access to health care is necessary for health disparities reduction but, alone, is not enough. The effects of access are minimized when the care of patients and populations is not sufficient to alleviate problems or conditions, or to prevent their appearance in the first place. Quality of care can mean the availability and delivery of technologically sophisticated techniques and equipment. However, in many cases and often as importantly, quality of care also means offering health care that is culturally sensitive, understandable, and appropriate for the targeted individual or population. In this issue of *Education for Health*, articles are presented that address both access and quality of care in relation to workforce development.

A topic that arose and continues to be discussed and debated within the conference proceedings of the Network: TUFH is that of health provider distribution (or maldistribution). In both developing and developed countries, there is a similar problem: physicians and often other health care providers tend to locate in more affluent areas, leading to shortages in impoverished inner city communities and in rural regions. The challenge related to the education and practice of the health workforce is developing and implementing strategies for both recruiting and then retaining health professionals in the inner city and rural sectors. For all countries, this is a major problem – for developing countries, it is further compounded as health care professionals may opt to leave their country and pursue their practices and careers in more developed countries.

Salafsky *et al.* (2005), in discussing the maldistribution of health care workers, point to the problem of “out-migration” and its impact in sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines, Haiti, Thailand, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other countries. The out-migration of physicians in particular has resulted in the loss of training dollars combined with additional resources needed in the home countries to train replacements for those who have left. At the Network: TUFH conference, True and colleagues, in their presentation “Health Workforce Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: A South-South Network to Strengthen Family Medicine and Primary Health Care” pointed out that skilled health workers tend to be concentrated in urban areas, private health services, and tertiary care hospitals, while a large proportion of the population lives in poor, rural communities. Further, these countries are the victims of “brain drain” where health care professionals migrate from developing to more developed countries. Similarly, Marcelo in “Responding to Philippine Health Challenges through Community Medicine” points out the exodus of nurses, physicians becoming nurses, and the continuing deteriorating health conditions of the Philippine people that have resulted from local, national, and global forces.

Network: TUFH provides a forum for not only identifying these types of issues in workforce development and distribution, but for discussing, designing, implementing, and, importantly, evaluating remedies – at local, national, and global levels. “Challenge” was the theme of the conference and participants presented and discussed their own challenges and attempts at solutions. We challenge you as members of the Network: TUFH to keep the conference challenge of health workforce development and distribution in the forefront and work with one another within the organization to address the ongoing challenges of access to and delivery of quality health care for all.

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Reference

SALAFSKY, B., GLASSER, M. & HA, J. (2005). Addressing issues of maldistribution of health care workers. *Annals Academy of Medicine Singapore*, 34, 520–526.