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New Initiative to Tackle Health Worker Migration

The Health Worker Migration Policy Initiative held its first meeting on 15th May at the World Health Organization's (WHO) headquarters in Geneva. It is aimed at finding practical solutions to the worsening problem of health worker migration from developing to developed countries. The initiative, convened and co-funded by the Global Health Workforce Alliance, is made up of two groups that will work closely together over the coming months to develop recommendations. The Migration Technical Working Group, which is being coordinated by WHO, brings together the International Organization for Migration, the International Labour Organization, professional associations, experts and academics.

A recent study (Connel et al. 2007) showed that the number of foreign-trained doctors has tripled in several OECD countries over the past three decades. The number of foreign-trained doctors from countries with chronic shortages of health workers is relatively small (less than 10% of the workforce) in developed countries. However, for some African countries, the migration of a few dozen doctors can mean losing more than 30% of their workforce, even as basic health needs remain unmet. Other health professions are also affected by this phenomenon. The study showed that from Swaziland, 60 to 80 nurses migrate to the UK each year, while fewer than 90 graduate from Swazi schools.

One of the initiative's first priorities will be to support WHO in drafting a framework for an International Code of Practice on Health Worker Migration, as called for by a resolution of the World Health Assembly in 2004. This framework will promote ethical recruitment, the protection of migrant health workers' rights and remedies for addressing the economic and social impact of health worker migration in developing countries. The Code of Practice will be the first of its kind on a global scale of migration. Ms. Mary Robinson, leader of the initiative, summarized the need for urgent action: "We cannot stand alone as individual countries continue to address their own increased needs for health workers without looking beyond their shores to the situation these migrating workers have left behind in their homelands. We cannot continue to shake our heads and bemoan the devastating brain drain from some of the neediest countries on the planet without forcing ourselves to search for – and actively promote – practical solutions that protect both the right of individuals to seek employment through migration and the right to health for all people."

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