

## Spotlight: Tackling the health sector 'brain drain'

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In many developing countries, including Zambia and Zimbabwe, the 'brain drain' of qualified health workers leaving for overseas has had an adverse effect on the health sector and the delivery and health-care services.

As the 38<sup>th</sup> Union World Conference on Lung Health led by the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) gets underway in Cape Town, this is one of many issues that government and civil society representatives will have to bear in mind and try to address.

As part of pre-conference meetings that started on November 5, a team of seven media representatives from a variety of countries were taken on a tour of a Cape Town diagnostic laboratory called the National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS) by the Geneva-based Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND).

The NHLS runs 15 other labs around South Africa and these are the entry points from which tuberculosis (TB) patients are able to access treatment, as this is where smear microscopy and liquid culture-based drug susceptibility tests are used to detect various strains of TB.

According to NHLS representatives, the Cape Town lab cultures between 13,000 and 15,000 specimens in a month. It can take up to two weeks to confirm a positive result for TB, while confirming a negative result can take up to one month.

The machines used to process specimens cost as much as US\$ 40,000, making them difficult to afford for governments in sub-Saharan Africa. The good news is that FIND has offered to form partnerships with the governments of developing countries and has reduced the price of their equipment by 50% on a lease basis. About 39 countries could benefit from this initiative.

Dr Vinand Nantulya, the Senior Policy and Implementation Officer at FIND, says, "The best case scenario for TB treatment is a simple and accurate test that can be carried out as near to the patient as possible but this has not yet become possible because this equipment is still being developed and therefore clients have to go to the health centres where the equipment is available for their tests."

While TB has been around for more than a century, currently most of the attention in health care is focussed on HIV, which was only identified 25 years ago. A lot has been done to refine HIV diagnostic equipment, but the methods for diagnosing TB remain limited to smear microscopy, x-rays and skin tests.

More money needs to be pumped into TB diagnostics but we also need to maintain the human resources needed to operate new equipment. As talk increases of integrating approaches to tackling HIV and TB, the time has come for conference delegates to include HIV programmes into their existing projects and for the International AIDS Conference committee to develop joint TB and HIV programmes. This will make it easier to tell who is doing what and will address the fact that co-infection with the two diseases is becoming increasingly common.

These conferences are the ideal forums for discussions on diagnostic funding, the purchasing of medicines and tackling health sector brain drain. TB remains the number one killer of people living with HIV and research shows that there is a link between drug resistant TB and HIV.

In developing countries, we desperately need the human resource to be able to carry out these

tests and to treat patients but many health-care professionals have left in search of greener pastures. Representatives of the NHLS told the visiting media personnel that the lab has also been affected by the brain drain with 15% of their staff leaving for other countries each year.

The Global Task Force on Human Resources on Health needs to address the brain drain in Africa by giving better incentives to health workers so that there are enough staff to maintain the fight against TB and HIV in developing countries.

This body needs to collaborate with the Global Fund, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNITAID, the Green Light Committee and the Stop TB Partnership in order to make this happen. Governments around the world need to commit seriously to this urgent issue.

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