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Nursing Migration & Retention in the Pacific Region

(Paper presented by the Secretariat)

At a glance

- Maintaining an adequate workforce, particularly in nursing and midwifery, remains a significant challenge in the Pacific region, exacerbated by factors like poor remuneration, challenging working conditions, and limited retention strategies.
- Efforts to address these challenges have been undertaken at both the regional and national levels, including initiatives by bodies like the Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery (PHONM) and the South Pacific Chief Nursing Midwifery Officers Alliance (SPCNMOA), yet significant gaps persist in addressing root causes of nurse attrition and ensuring a sustainable healthcare workforce.
- Disparities between the demand for nursing services and the available supply of qualified professionals persist, with data inadequacies complicating efforts to address workforce needs effectively.
- Urgent action is needed to strengthen the nursing workforce, entailing investment in accreditation, creation of new jobs, updating nursing legislation to broaden scopes of practice, implementing national retention plans/policies, providing in-service training, improving the salaries of nurses and provision of safe working environments. These measures are essential to support the retention of nurses.
- Pacific Heads of Health are urged to: - 1) Empower senior nursing leadership in policy and decision-making; 2) Implement National Retention plans/policies for nurses and midwives, offering incentives for rural and underserved area retention; 3) Strengthen nursing investment including primary healthcare workforce expansion and career pathways to address health needs; 4) Ensure nurses and midwives have a supportive work environment, resources and fair pay; 5) Focus on regional nursing and midwifery workforce planning and forecasting utilising health labour market analysis; 6) Review nursing regulations to optimise the scope of practice of the nursing workforce to enhance access to primary healthcare; and 7) Establish agreements between countries on health labour market analyses to mitigate negative impacts on the health system of the country of origin.
- Development partners are encouraged to: 1) Invest in nursing, increasing domestic graduates and establishing positions and career pathways to address healthcare needs including those related to climate change, pandemics, NCDs and social determinants of health; 2) Assist in reviewing nursing regulations to optimise the scope of practice of the nursing workforce and facilitate improved access to primary healthcare; and 3) Support the implementation of digital health technology to mitigate workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.

Current situation

1. In the Pacific region, the challenge of maintaining an adequate healthcare workforce, particularly in nursing and midwifery, persists amidst a backdrop of longstanding issues and recent exacerbations. Factors such as insufficient remuneration, poor working conditions, and limited retention strategies have fuelled a significant outflow of nurses, exacerbating an already unstable situation. The onset of COVID-19 further exposed vulnerabilities within the healthcare system, intensifying existing strains on the nursing workforce¹.
2. Efforts to address these challenges have been undertaken at both regional and national levels. Initiatives like the Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery (PHONM) and the South Pacific Chief Nursing Midwifery Officers Alliance (SPCNMOA) have sought to enhance nursing leadership and policymaking, providing a platform for collaborative action. Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain in addressing the root causes of nurse attrition and ensuring a sustainable healthcare workforce.
3. One critical issue is the disparity between the demand for nursing services and the available supply of qualified professionals. The Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) rely heavily on nurses, who constitute approximately 74% of the healthcare workforce and deliver the majority of services, particularly in remote areas. However, the supply of nurses has failed to keep pace with increasing healthcare demands, worsened by limitations on the production of nursing graduates due to institutional and budgetary constraints.
4. Data inadequacies further complicate efforts to address workforce needs effectively. While nursing schools in the region continue to produce graduates annually, there is a lack of comprehensive data to assess whether these outputs align with domestic healthcare requirements. For instance, in Fiji, The Fiji National University (FNU) School of Nursing (SON), the Sangam School of Nursing and the University of Fiji graduated 260 nurses in 2023, of which 50% were from FNU. However, challenges persist in retaining experienced faculty and ensuring the absorption of graduates into the healthcare system.
5. To address these challenges, stakeholders must prioritise political commitment, improved retention strategies, and strengthened regional cooperation in nursing education and regulation. This includes investing in workforce development programs, enhancing working conditions and incentives for nurses, and fostering partnerships between academic institutions and healthcare facilities. By addressing these issues collectively, the Pacific region can work towards building a resilient healthcare workforce capable of meeting the evolving needs of its population.

¹ M. Rumsey, M. Leong, D. Brown, M. Larui, M. Capelle and N. Rodrigues, "Achieving Universal Health Care in the Pacific: The need for nursing and midwifery leadership. Review Paper," *Lancet Reg Health West Pac*, pp. 1-8, 2022.

Future vision

6. Over the next decade, our vision is to strategically invest in the nursing workforce, empowering nurses and midwives in PICTs to create environments conducive to decent work. By prioritising nursing policy objectives, we aim to support universal health coverage, addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change emergencies, future pandemics, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and social determinants of health. This investment entails a comprehensive approach, focusing on several key areas:
7. Firstly, we will enhance nursing and midwifery **education** to ensure that practitioners possess the necessary knowledge and competencies to address evolving population health needs effectively.
8. Secondly, we will prioritise nursing **workforce planning and forecasting**, aligning job demands with primary health care and other critical population health priorities. This strategic approach will enable us to manage international and regional mobility and migration effectively.
9. Thirdly, we will advocate for the updating of **nursing legislations and regulations**, optimising the roles of nurses and midwives, particularly in rural and remote areas. By reducing disparities in access to healthcare services, especially health emergencies and crises, we aim to protect vulnerable populations.
10. Lastly, we are committed to fostering safe working environments and providing adequate resources to enable nurses to deliver high quality care. By ensuring that nurses have the support and tools they need, we can enhance health service delivery and ultimately improve health outcomes for all individuals in the Pacific region. This vision aligns with broader global and regional goals such as the Healthy Islands vision and the Sustainable Development Goals, contributing to the realisation of a healthier, more resilient future for our communities.

Examples of recent progress

11. At the 2023 PHONM meeting and the Western Pacific Nursing forum in February 2024, reports highlighted progress across the Pacific in various areas:
12. **Fiji** has taken significant steps to address nursing migration and retention, collaborating with WHO on a policy brief aimed at mitigating nursing migration challenges. As a result of this collaboration, Fiji has implemented several key reforms to enhance the working conditions and incentives for nurses and midwives. Notably, there has been a substantial increase in salaries for nurses, including a change in salary band for intern nurses, and the introduction of a new policy on overtime pay for midwives and nurses on band G. Since August 2023, Fiji has also introduced a retention allowance of 8% across the board for all nurses, serving as a crucial incentive to encourage nurses to remain in the workforce. Moreover, Fiji has undertaken recruitment efforts, deploying over 200 nurse graduates from the country's two training institutions and creating new positions for Enrolled Nurses and nursing aids. Additionally, reforms in the Nursing internship program have been implemented, reducing the duration from 18 to 12 months.

13. **Kiribati** is focussed on improving the work environment, recruiting new graduates, and reviewing nurse salaries to enhance retention and attract talent. Furthermore, Kiribati is working towards expanding education and training opportunities for nurses, recognising the importance of continuous professional development in maintaining high standards of care and adapting to evolving healthcare needs.
14. **Papua New Guinea** has developed a Rural Attraction and Retention Policy targeting health workers, including the nurses, to addressing staffing challenges in remote areas.
15. **Several countries, including the Cook Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu**, are in the process of developing National Nursing Strategic Plans aligned with global directives and national health priorities. Vanuatu has implemented an incentive package to attract, recruit and retain midwives and nurses in identified areas, demonstrating a proactive approach to addressing workforce shortages.
16. These examples showcase innovative approaches to address workforce challenges and improve nursing retention and recruitment across the Pacific. By implementing targeted policies, collaborating with development partners, and aligning strategies with national health plans, these countries are laying the foundation for a resilient and sustainable healthcare workforce. Such initiatives serve as inspirations for other countries in the region seeking to enhance their nursing workforce capacity and providing quality healthcare services to their populations.

Why urgent action is needed now?

17. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to prioritise significant progress on strengthening the nursing workforce in the Pacific. Nurses serve as frontline healthcare providers, essential for delivering primary healthcare and managing both communicable and non-communicable diseases, particularly in remote rural areas where access to healthcare may be limited. Their roles extend to health promotion, emergency care, epidemic response, and disaster management².
18. Investment in the nursing workforce is critical for several reasons. Updating the nursing legislation to expand scopes of practice enables nurses to fulfil evolving healthcare needs effectively. National retention plans/policies are essential for retaining skilled nurses, especially amidst the global nursing shortages exacerbated by the pandemic. Creating new job opportunities and improving nurses' salaries are vital measures to attract and retain talent within the profession. Accrediting education programs and providing in-service training ensure a sufficient number of trained and skilled nurses per population density. Additionally, offering safe working environments and adequate resources is crucial for maintaining a sustainable nursing workforce, especially during health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.
19. Failure to address these challenges with sufficient urgency could have severe consequences for people across the Pacific. Inadequate investment in nursing could lead to further shortages, compromising access to essential healthcare services and exacerbating health disparities, particularly in underserved communities. Furthermore, a weakened nursing workforce may hinder the effective response to future health crises, threatening public health outcomes and overall societal resilience.

² World Health Organization, "State of the world's nursing 2020: investing in education, jobs and leadership," World Health Organization, 2020.

20. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the importance of robust healthcare systems and the essential role of nurses in crisis response, underscore the urgency of investing in the nursing workforce. By harnessing resources available to fight the pandemic and leveraging newfound awareness of healthcare vulnerabilities, sustainable change can be achieved, ensuring a resilient nursing workforce capable of meeting the evolving healthcare needs of Pacific communities.

Recommendations to be considered by the Heads of Health

Pacific Heads of Health are urged to prioritise the following recommendations:

- Empower senior nursing leadership in policy and decision-making;
- Implement National Retention plans/policies for nurses and midwives, offering incentives for rural and underserved area retention;
- Strengthen nursing investment, including primary healthcare workforce expansion and career pathways to address health needs;
- Ensure nurses and midwives have a supportive work environment, resources and fair pay;
- Focus on regional nursing and midwifery workforce planning and forecasting utilizing health labour market analysis;
- Review nursing regulations to optimise the scope of practice of the nursing workforce to enhance access to primary healthcare; and
- Establish agreements between countries on health labour market analyses to mitigate negative impacts on the health system of the country of origin.

Recommendations to be considered by Development Partners

Development partners are encouraged to:

- Invest in nursing, increasing domestic graduates and establishing positions and career pathways to address healthcare needs, including those related to climate change, pandemics, NCDs and social determinants of health;
- Assist in reviewing nursing regulations to optimise the scope of practice of the nursing workforce and facilitate improved access to primary healthcare; and
- Support the implementation of digital health technology to mitigate workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.