

Strengthening Malta's Health System Resilience through retention and development of Human Resources

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Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat^{1,2}, Prof Lino
Briguglio¹, Dr Erio Ziglio³

1. Islands and Small States Institute University of Malta
2. Ministry for Health Malta
3. WHO EURO

The Issues

- Lower ratios of health professionals per capita in small countries (with some exceptions)
- Exposure to critical issues arising from changes in global, European (or large single country) policy contexts
- Lack of resource capacity to achieve high levels of self-sufficiency in the provision of specialised health services
- Sustainability of training and recruitment of some types of health professions



Further issues

- Heavy reliance on large neighbouring countries for training and delivery of specialised services
- Very often specialists can only be trained overseas with no guarantee that they will eventually return to practice in their home country
- Specific difficulties arise with provision of services for patients with rare diseases



Resilience of small country health systems is hampered by factors closely connected to their small human resources population pool

BUT

Small countries can address the fragility of their human resource ecosystem and improve the resilience of the overall health sector by introducing processes and mechanisms that reduce the system-level vulnerability of its human resources



Case 1 – Medical Brain Drain

- United Kingdom changed its medical specialty training programme structure
- Upon accession to the EU, Malta was losing more than 35% of its graduates immediately upon qualification
- A UK Foundation School programme was set up in Malta
- Brain Drain was reversed
- The programme now recruits overseas medical graduates and demand for places exceeds supply



Case 2 - Medical Specialisation

- Lack of formal systems for specialisation prior to EU accession
- Need for a domestic system of specialisation and accreditation to be established (in partnership with other countries)
- Mechanisms for part training in Malta and part training overseas assist in retaining capacity locally, ensuring necessary exposure to patient numbers/diversity and keeping the hospital as a teaching and training institution

Case 3 - Nursing qualifications

- Upon EU accession Malta had more than 50% of its nurses holding a non-recognised qualification
- Over 800 nurses in a period of around ten years went through an upskilling programme
- This was an impetus to professionalise the nursing career stream, nurses now obtain higher level qualifications, are warranted and this has a positive impact on service delivery

Case 4 – Developing new professions

- EU funding was obtained to build a state of the art hospital for oncology
- An urgent need for therapeutic radiographers and medical physicists emerged
- Two university level courses were developed with UK based partners
- University of Malta is now self-sufficient in the provision of training for these professions
- Patients who previously had to seek treatment abroad are now treated locally

Retaining expertise

- The visiting consultants programme offers convenience to patients but also enables diffusion of innovative programmes and techniques to keep professionals networked and updated
- Development and maintenance of education and training is good for quality, for funding but also for motivating and retaining specialised expertise

Results

- The number of physicians per population, including trainees, was below the EU average in 2010. However, nowadays, it has risen to be on a par with the rest of the EU
- Nursing profession has been upskilled
- New allied health professionals have been developed
- University of Malta and Mater Dei Hospital renowned as teaching institutions and foreign students are a source of revenue



Risks

- Small shifts in migratory and recruitment patterns can have large impacts
- Over reliance on one large single country is a risky strategy (KIV Brexit)
- Shift from under capacity to over supply can occur very quickly

Overcoming risks

- Health workforce information systems to monitor quantitative and qualitative trends in the workforce
- Multiple country agreements to spread risks of policy change in large countries
- Recruitment of expatriate students to ensure sustainability of education and training courses

Looking forward

- Health workforce is a focus within the thematic priority on structured cooperation between health systems in Malta's upcoming EU Presidency in 2017
- Small countries can respond and adapt rapidly to changes in workforce development and skills provision
- Health system cooperation to ensure continuous training and development can be important for quality of care as well as staff motivation

