

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Using E-Learning for Skills Transfer, Motivation and Retention of Health Workers in Zambia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Health system strengthening continues to be a moving target for developing countries with the human resource factor the most critical bottleneck towards universal health coverage. The human resource management cycle revolves around three interdependent factors: production, recruitment, deployment and retention. The most elusive is retention where both monetary and non-monetary reward systems are equally important. The purpose of this is to document establishment of e-learning as a tool for online skills transfer to address retention of health workers in a cost-effectively.

**Methods:** This prospective study analyses the process of establishing an e-learning facility in Central Province of Zambia. Visitations of the site in the PEPFAR (US President Emergency Plan for Aids Relief in Africa) sponsored Chainama College of Health Sciences, Kabwe Campus premises and technical inputs and specifications were documented.

**Results:** The Ministry of Health maximized the prevailing thriving partnership in the health sector by allocating accommodation to e-learning using resources from RMNCH Trust Fund with the WHO dedicating technical support for this concept in close liaison with Ministry of Health officials in Central Province. The facility can accommodate 36 students and is earmarked to be a training facility equipped with appropriate equipment and software to cater for the entire spectrum of diseases and conditions in Zambia. This is an institution which can support the human resource cycle of production, recruitment, deployment and retention, an innovation that be scaled up to address national retention needs.

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**Discussion:** E-learning has ushered a sustainable modality of skills transfer to many areas including human resources for health. The government has successfully engaged cooperating partners in Zambia to implement this improvisation in the health sector. The WHO has played its part in ensuring that the critical health resource for health pillar of health systems is addressed.

**Conclusion:** Zambia health sector is instituting an intervention that can improve retention of health workers using non-financial motivation through sustainable e-learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Health system strengthening is the foundation for achieving all targets being set in the health sector from health for all by year 2000, millennium development goals by 2015 and now the sustainable development goals by 2030.<sup>1</sup> Of the six pillars of health systems the most frequent bottleneck in most developing countries is the human resources.<sup>2</sup> The WHO recommends the minimum human resource for health density necessary to attain universal access to health to be 23 per 10 000 population.<sup>3</sup> Few countries in the African Region meet that magic number and have figures that are threatened by gradual decline due to brain drain of the elite staff to developed countries where the remuneration packages are perceived to be better. However, financial remuneration is not the only factor. Other factors such motivation by recognition and nonfinancial incentives including the need for professional development, better quality of life and personal safety play an equally important role.<sup>4</sup>

The human resource management cycle has four key facets which have to be addressed simultaneously in order

to have sustainable capacity to deliver equitable health services. These interdependent components are production, recruitment, deployment and retention of the resources especially in hard to reach areas where these services are mostly required.<sup>5</sup>

Retention of health workers in hard to reach or rural areas has been one of the drivers of health service inequity characterized by poor health outcomes. Although monetary incentives have been shown to increase job satisfaction it is by no means the only one.<sup>4</sup> Some provisions such as accommodation, flexible leave conditions, water and sanitation and safe drinking water. Availability of supportive supervision and refresher training play important roles in motivating staff and making them stay wherever they are operating from in spite of the rural or urban setting.<sup>6</sup>

The government of the Republic of Zambia has focused on the health system approach of improving outcomes in the health sector. The most notable has been construction of infrastructure especially the road highways as well as feeder roads and 650 health posts with staff accommodation with the target to reduce the distance to the nearest health facilities to less than five kilometres.<sup>7</sup> The government approval to recruit nearly 10,000 health workers in the next financial year is a huge boost to the capacity to make the health posts functional and fully operation since there are unemployed qualified staffs that can be recruited to fill the new establishments. The new human resource support can increase the staff to population to nearly 20 per thousand just falling short of the minimum as recommended by the WHO for attainment of 80% of universal access to health care.<sup>3</sup> With the proposed numbers of staff earmarked for recruitment, the subject of motivation to retention becomes highly topical in Zambia as the missing.

The government has recently been supported by partners to strengthen capacity building through e-learning by operationalizing state of the art online training facility in Central Province to address non-financial motivation of the health workers through holding of refresher and preservice and in-service training sessions.

The purpose of this study was to document the process of establishing a purpose built e-learning facility for national use for providing training and skills transfer to health

workers as a modality to motivate them and thus retain them where they are currently based.

## **METHODS**

This was a prospective study that examined the impact of engagement of partnerships in the health sector in Zambia. There have been visitations by various partners to the Chainama Clinical Officers' Training School in Kabwe; Central Province where the e-learning facility is being established. Funds from the United Nations Trust Fund channelled through WHO and UNICEF were applied to procure state of the art equipment and software and licensure for the requisite software.

## **RESULTS**

The Ministry of Health maximized the prevailing thriving partnership in the health sector by allocating accommodation to e-learning using resources from RMNCH Trust Fund. WHO dedicated technical support for this concept in close liaison with Ministry of Health officials in Central Province. The facility can accommodate 36 students and is earmarked to be a training facility equipped with appropriate equipment and software to cater for the entire spectrum of diseases and conditions in Zambia. This is an institution which can support the human resource cycle of production, recruitment, deployment and retention.

Once fully functional in October 2016, the outputs from the institution will fit in the Ministry of Health plans where it has targeted to improve the 6 pillars of health systems in Zambia in a holistic manner. Service provision has been one highest on agenda through building of new district infrastructures such as district hospitals and more than 650 health posts throughout the country.

## **DISCUSSION**

Health workers in Zambia have long since identified some of the non-financial motivations they need such as supportive supervision and professional development with refresher online training on continual basis. Opening of this institution will come at the right time to achieve this non-financial motivator. The Ministry of Health maximized partnership working relationships to mobilize resources for e-learning a hitherto far-fetched target for

human resource strengthening because of non-availability of requisite funds.<sup>8</sup> It has harnessed accommodation facilities in the recently renovated Chainama College of Health Sciences campus in Kabwe and resources from the United Nations for this purpose-built facility for training health workers through e-learning to provide the much needed supportive supervision and profession career development. It is anticipated that the entire national health force will go through this facility on rotation to provide refresher courses during the time they are under employment in the health sector.<sup>8</sup>

The sustainability of the investment by the government in the construction/refurbishment of hospitals including district hospitals for the new districts, new health posts in new and pre-existing districts, extensive road networks and the new expansion of the human resource for health establishments requires swift application of appropriately innovative interventions. The full human resource cycle needs to be addressed with similar impetus; production, recruitment, deployment and retention. Special single mindedness now needs to focus on deployment and retention because the first two are already under way.

Professional development, staff accommodation and other social amenities, electricity and water and sanitation provisions have been reported as the needs that motivate staff from studies on health in southern Africa. In fact improved professional development, staff safety were the key drivers for staff migrating from southern Africa to the rich countries.<sup>9,10</sup>

The establishment of this e-learning facility in Central Province is not only geographically strategic but also quite timely. As most of the ingredients of improved staffing are in place the remaining driver of staff retention is supportive supervision and with it continued professional development through e-learning.

## CONCLUSION

The health sector in Zambia has put in place most of the key ingredients of the health system including strengthening the tenets of human resources for health management cycle. What remains is a dedicated thrust on retention and sustaining the interventions especially

professional development through e-learning and supportive supervision.

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