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Action AIDS

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The Global Health Workforce in Crisis: Combating HIV/AIDS in the Context of Comprehensive Health Services

“Perhaps the most important area to ensure success in achieving universal access [to HIV services] is a skilled and motivated workforce...the situation calls for drastic measures.”

Dr. Anders Nordstrom, Acting Director-General of the WHO

As of late 2006, Zimbabwean physicians were reporting three month delays in starting new patients on ARV treatments due to a lack of health workers. People became sicker and died during this interval. That is just one example of the consequences of a decimated health infrastructure.

Sustained Progress Requires More Health Workers

Although the United States has made extraordinary progress in combating global HIV/AIDS through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the expansion and sustainability of US-supported HIV services requires a multi-faceted plan to address the health worker crisis facing many AIDS-burdened countries. The 2007 Institute of Medicine PEPFAR review found: “[T]he growing consensus is that existing capacity for HIV/AIDS services is nearing exhaustion, and donors need to focus more on *helping to expand capacity*. During its visits to the focus countries, the Committee saw many programs of all varieties, but particularly those providing ART, that were overflowing their capacity, had long waiting lists, and had insufficient numbers of staff who were highly stressed. The shortage of health care workers of all kinds was particularly acute.”

The health workforce crisis must be addressed in a comprehensive way, attending to the *totality* of health services, not HIV/AIDS services only. *The delivery of AIDS services cannot be seen in isolation from other essential health services. Consider:*

- Health workers may be drawn away from other health services to provide HIV/AIDS services, reducing the capacity to deliver other essential, non-HIV services. *Consider:*
 - A US-funded study found that in order to simply maintain a 2003-level of general health services while adding PEPFAR’s HIV services, Cote d’Ivoire would need an additional 300 physicians and 1,400 more nurses
 - In 2010, Nigeria is projected to have a shortage of about 21,000 nurses necessary to meet the health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which focus on maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Nurses perform many of the services necessary to achieve these and PEPFAR goals.
- The success in the fight against HIV/AIDS is intertwined with the success in combating other diseases. *Consider:*
 - Tuberculosis is the most common cause of death for people living with HIV/AIDS. Extremely drug resistant TB (XDR-TB) has proven fatal even to those on AIDS medication.
 - Malaria increases the risk of contracting HIV, and HIV increases the risk of contracting malaria.

- Expanding access to reproductive health services reduces HIV transmission.
- In areas where policies promote routine-offer HIV testing, widespread HIV testing depends on large numbers of people interacting with the health system. This requires accessible, quality health services to draw people to health centers where they can be tested for HIV. This, in turn, requires more health workers, without whom health services will be neither accessible nor of good quality.
- As HIV services are pushed down to the community level where health workers are in the shortest supply, integration of HIV and other services becomes a necessity. A single nurse staffing a clinic must be able to perform both HIV and non-HIV services. Thus, the continued success in scaling up HIV programs depends on a country's ability to meet its overall health workforce needs.

Summary:

Success in combating HIV/AIDS will be measured not only by the number of patients receiving treatment, but also by the capacity of countries to sustain that treatment for generations to come. To achieve this objective, the United States must support efforts by countries to enable all people to access a motivated, skilled, and supported health workforce, as well as build the health workforce of the future.

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