Healthcare Workforce Challenges in Saudi Arabia

(A Brief Overview)

Introduction

The government of Saudi Arabia has given high priority to the development of health care services at all levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. As a consequence, the health of the Saudi population has greatly improved in recent decades. However, a number of issues pose challenges to the health care system, such as shortage of Saudi health professionals, changing patterns of disease, high demand on services, poor accessibility to some health care facilities, lack of a national health information system, and the underutilization of the potential of electronic health strategies.

Focusing on Health workforce Challenges

Providing qualified manpower is perhaps the biggest challenge that Saudi Arabia faces as it expands its healthcare capacity. Despite investment in education and training, demand for foreign healthcare workers is likely to remain strong in the coming years.

The Saudi health care system is challenged by the shortage of local health care professionals, such as physicians, nurses and pharmacists. The majority of health personnel are expatriates and this leads to a high rate of turnover and instability in the workforce. According to the MOH the total health workforce in Saudi Arabia, including all other sectors, is about 248,000; more than half of them (125,000) work in the MOH. Saudis constitute 38% of this total workforce. Of these, 23.1% are physicians, while 32.3% are nurses. In the MOH, Saudis constitute about 54% of the health workforce, (physicians 22.6% and nurses 50.3%). The rates of physicians and nurses in Saudi Arabia are 16 and 36 respectively per 10,000 population, lower than in other countries such as Bahrain (30 and 58 per 10,000), Kuwait (18 and 37 per 10,000), Japan (12 and 95 per 10,000), Canada (19 and 100 per 10,000), France (37 and 81 per 10,000) and the United States of America (27 and 98 per 10,000).

The ability to formulate and apply practical strategies to retain and attract more Saudis into the medical and health professions, particularly nursing, is a clear priority for effective reform of the Saudi health care system. Many efforts have been taken by the government to teach and train Saudis for health professional jobs. Since 1958, a number of medical, nursing and health schools have been opened around the nation to meet this goal. Apart from private colleges and institutes, there are a total of 73 colleges for medicine, health and nursing as well as 4 health institutes in Saudi Arabia. Efforts to establish such colleges are in accordance with training programs that aim to substitute the largely expatriate workforce with qualified Saudi Arabian nationals in all sectors, including health. The budget allocation for training and scholarships has increased and
many MOH employees are offered a chance to pursue their studies abroad. This strategy could improve the skills of current employees, raise the quality of health care and, it is hoped, decrease the rate of turnover among health professionals. However, these efforts may not be enough to solve the challenges. The proportion of Saudi Arabian health professionals in the MOH workforce is expected to decrease in the future as the expansion in health care facilities around the country has the effect of spreading a scare resource even more thinly.

More realistic plans and long-term strategies need to be consolidated by the MOH in cooperation with government and private sectors. A good example of such cooperation is the King Abdullah international scholarship program which was established by the Ministry of Higher Education. In its stage 4, priority has been given to medical specialists including medicine, nursing, pharmacy and other health majors. However, more medical colleges and training programs need to be established around the country. New laws and regulations to develop and reorganize medical human resources by the MOH are urgently required. Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal

Despite the efforts being carried out by the Saudi government in developing and enhancing the health sector, there are performance issues particularly with respect to efficient and effective services that are still plaguing the nursing sector specifically and the healthcare industry generally. There is particularly a growing concern about the poor performance of nursing services in Saudi Arabia’s public health sector.

High Turnover and Saudization Gaps
One of the major costs for healthcare providers is spending on qualified medical staff. A large number of doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff in KSA migrate to Western Countries after a few years due to better opportunities and training facilities. In addition, the current Saudi regulations for recruitment and Saudization continue to further increase the staff cost due to limited available resources. Government role is extremely important in establishing career-focused educational institutions (such as medical and nursing colleges) to increase the supply of local medical professionals and to drive qualified Saudi talent into jobs. Moreover, to overcome supply gap the Government needs to provide funding to private sector and improved employment regulations to be able to attract qualified resources from abroad.

Saudi Nursing Shortages and Other Challenges
According to World Health Organization (WHO), Saudi Arabia needs about 170,000 nurses; it is not an easy job to recruit and train such a number of nurses in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the limited nursing teaching facilities, the Saudi social perception of nurses was a major factor in the nurse shortage in the country today. First, being low
paying job, nursing is considered a middle to low class job, in contrast with its counterpart of being a physician. Secondly, with long working hours and night shifts, Saudi female nurses have had hard time in practicing their jobs due to strict social traditions. Last but not the least, the people’s perceptions of being the nurse of nothing more than a maid; who has to follow the physician's orders and the patient’s needs, has ruined the nurse image completely. As hospitals across the country face a shortage in nurses, most Saudi hospitals have chosen the path of importing professional labor to satisfy its needs of necessary nurses. Yet, with a nurses turnover of almost 30% a year, importing nurses has become a constant headache to hospital staff and management.

**Competiton from Public Sector Hospitals**
Public Sector Hospitals are not cost driven and therefore provide quality healthcare services to the population either free or at subsidized rates. However, with the current population growth, access has been a major issue in public sector hospitals. This shortage has resulted in an increase in demand for private healthcare facilities. With increased healthcare costs and emergence of lifestyle related diseases, public and private players should form partnerships to create better provision of care.

Private hospitals will continue to play an even more important and crucial role within the Kingdom. Emergence of lifestyle related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, heart (cardiovascular) and kidney (dialyses) has created new opportunities for growth and the private sector is gradually expected to play the role of main providers for these segments and hence the need for more skilled healthcare professionals that are currently not available in the Kingdom.
MoH Clinical Staff Growth
(1432h-1440h, Thousands)

Source: MoH Statistics Books 1432-1434; 2014 MoH Manpower Standards; MoH Strategy

- MoH clinical staff has been historically growing at 5% p.a., with Saudi staff growing at 10%, while non-Saudi staff has been decreasing at -1%.
- With the existing growth rates, the MoH would achieve total clinical staff of 242,000 by 1440h.
- However, to achieve the targets set by its strategy, the MoH would require to have total clinical staff of 351,000 by 1440h, leading as such to a gap of 109,000 clinical staff.
- Given that Saudi clinical staff supply is assumed to continue growing at the same rate of 10% p.a., the bulk of the gap is to be covered with non-Saudi clinical staff.
Overall, the shortage of nurses in KSA is increasing across the board and is expected to reach ~48K nurses by 2020.


References:
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4. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Healthcare Overview, Collier Study

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