

Motivating and educating health professionals to work in less attractive specialties

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Impact Paragraph

This section aims to briefly explain the rationale and objective of this PhD project, followed by a presentation of the scientific and societal impacts of the research work to those who might benefit from this project.

7.1. PROJECT RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND FINDINGS

The shortage of qualified healthcare workers is an issue that needs urgent attention in many countries. Within the overall shortage situation, the current supply of healthcare workers in primary care specialties and in specialties that provide preventive care services in the community, despite their important role in healthcare systems, does not meet the needs while demands are particularly acute. Several reasons are pointed out for the preponderance of specialist over generalist or “preventivist” doctors, such as: fewer medical students choose non-specialist specialties, low job satisfaction of generalist doctors due to low incomes, high workload, difficult working conditions, limited career development opportunities, or perceived low prestige compared to specialist doctors. These unfavorable conditions lead to problems in recruiting new students and retaining practicing healthcare workers in these less attractive specialties (LASs), and these in turn lead to poor health outcomes of the population, especially in the primary care domains.

Many strategies to increase the health workforce in LAS have been implemented over the world, including financial incentives, improving healthcare infrastructure and physicians’ working and living conditions, encouraging young doctors to work in remote areas or providing close mentoring and supervision. Although these strategies have positive impacts on the retention of LAS doctors, as extrinsic motivators, they do not have long-lasting effects. These strategies also require many human and financial resource inputs, which are limited in developing countries. As general education and medical education, in particular, have important effects on specialty choice of undergraduate students and graduates, intervention in education could be a potential solution for the problem of healthcare worker shortage in LASs. Educational activities may help to increase students’ perceptions of LASs and practicing LASs doctors’ satisfaction, which, in turn, may help to create and nurture their intrinsic motivation and commitment to choose LAS as their medical career.

In order to provide essential information for the development of proper educational interventions to address the challenges in LASs healthcare worker shortage, this Thesis focuses on studying the career motivation, needs and expectations in all phases of the educational continuum, including students, graduates, and practicing doctors in a specific LAS program, Preventive Medicine (PM). Its main aims are to contribute to the theory development of motivating PM students and graduates to choose LAS as a career, and to develop guidelines of how education can help to decrease the shortage in LASs. To achieve this goal, we conducted four studies, including three empirical studies and one literature review under the format of a position paper.

Study 1 demonstrates the differences in motivating factors to study PM and future job expectations between students who chose PM as their first choice to study and those who did not, that is, second-choice students. Study 2 was conducted to investigate how these differences in motivations and expectations are related to students' perceptions of PM. The findings from Studies 1 and 2 point to the importance of receiving sufficient information about PM in forming students' decisions on future career and correcting their misperceptions of PM. In Study 3, we found that there is no difference in the rate of retention between first-choice or second-choice graduates, although their motivations and reasons to stay in the field still vary. Study 4 is a position paper in which we proposed a set of guidelines for designing and organizing CME in such a way that it could help to attract and retain physicians in LASs.

7.2. IMPACT ON SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

The four studies presented in this Thesis show the relation between an individual's initial interest, personal needs, perceptions and expectations, with the motivation to choose a medical specialty in the whole continuum of expertise, including students, graduates, and practicing doctors. This project extends the existing theoretical frameworks of predicting specialty choice of medical students when applied to the situation of specialties that are less attractive and in the context of a developing country. The proposed set of guidelines for developing CME provides additional support for designing and organizing the training activities. The knowledge presented in the Thesis can serve as a basis for the design and implementation of appropriate educational strategies on vocation and career development to increase the motivation of healthcare workers in the specialties that are struggling with recruitment and retention of workforce.

The results of this project have several practical implications for stakeholders who are involved in educating and managing human resources in medical specialties that are less attractive, such as policy makers, educational managers or program developers and educators in health professions education institutions. This section proposes practical suggestions for each party's considerations, which are presented in three strategies: (1) approaches and plans to train health workers in LASs; (2) vocational and marketing strategies to influence the public perceptions of LASs, and (3) making LASs more relevant and connected (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: Summary of practical implications of the Thesis

Strategies	Policy makers	Educational managers, Program developers	Educators
Appropriate approaches and plans	Consider the effectiveness of training of LASs at the undergraduate level as well as create other strategies to increase human resources in LASs	Make plans for recruitment and selection of appropriate candidates for LASs training	Conduct multiple instructional and evaluation activities that relate to learners' workplaces
Vocational education and marketing strategies	Conduct early education activities of vocation, including social media in primary, secondary and thirddary schools	Conduct more marketing strategies to advertise the attractiveness of LASs to potential students	Increase student's perceptions of LASs via teaching activities, role models, personal experiences to publicize LASs characteristics
Relevance and connection	Develop policies to increase opportunities for LASs health workers to access CME activities and stay committed to the specialties.	Reform the curriculum, giving more time for extracurricular activities and early exposure to practice in LASs	Create and maintain a connection via the learning community to reduce professional isolation and increase competence of LASs students and graduates of CME.

7.3. IMPACT ON POLICY MAKERS

Developing appropriate strategies to cope with the problem of healthcare worker shortages has always remained a challenge for policy makers. The results from this project could serve as evidence to inform policy making in education and in healthcare systems to increase the number of health workers in less attractive medical specialties (as seen in the left part of Table 7.1). Together with the approach to train PM doctors at the undergraduate level as a solution to the problem of shortage of PM health workers, Vietnamese policy makers should consider the use of this specialty at postgraduate training. Besides applying a variety of motivating strategies towards practicing health workers, the essential purpose of medical education to attract more potential workforce for these specialties should be recognized and implemented. To support the formation of accurate perceptions of potential students and social understanding toward LASs, it is necessary to increase the knowledge and experiences of students by stimulating educational activities of vocation and career development before and during the training program, including broadcasting in mass media the important role and function of LASs in the healthcare system. Other management policies to increase and equalise the opportunities to access CME activities for LAS healthcare workers as a method of promoting their personal and professional development should be developed in order to enhance their commitment to the specialties.

7.4. IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGERS AND PROGRAM DEVELOPERS

Students who choose a less attractive medical specialty might have various characteristics, needs, and expectations. Educational managers or training program developers should keep this diversity in mind when designing new training programs for LASs so that they have appropriate interventions for each group of students (as seen in the middle part of Table 7.1). Program managers should consider implementing more activities that give candidates the opportunities to express their needs, perceptions and expectations at the stage of recruiting new students, instead of relying only on results of the entrance exams. Marketing strategies to advertise the attractiveness of LASs to increase students' accurate perceptions and attitudes toward LASs should be conducted frequently. In order to effectively retain many students, the training curriculum should be designed or revised to help students have early exposure to LASs or have sufficient information to make their decision of career choice in a LAS.

7.5. IMPACT ON EDUCATORS

Teachers at every stage of the educational system should play the role as information source and career guidance to their students (as seen in the right part of Table 7.1). First, to be involved in CME activities, educators should customize the contents to the needs of LAS physicians, including implementing multiple instructional and assessment activities that relate to learners' work places. Second, teachers in medical schools should facilitate the learning process of students to increase perceptions of the functions of LASs in the healthcare system. Through a broad array of teaching activities as well as being role models and sharing their personal experiences, teachers can inspire their students to study and pursue a career in the LASs, particularly students who have lower motivation. And finally, they also have a major role in establishing and maintaining the professional connection among learners, which are essential to reduce the feeling of isolation of healthcare workers in LASs.

Making a decision in career choices is not an easy task for medical students and their family, especially in the specialties that they do not have sufficient information and experiences with. Since all people have their own dreams, values and expectations, their career choice would be made in combination with both personal preferences and social demands. All stakeholders that are directly or indirectly related to the healthcare and educational sectors should provide an open environment to support potential healthcare workers to make the right decision in career choice. While planning for the future labour market in the health care sector, policy makers, educational leaders and program developers could use the results from this Thesis as an evidence-informed basis to create proper strategies for student selection, curriculum development and renovation, and healthcare worker retention.