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HEALTH WORKFORCE

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in health systems, many resulting from chronic underinvestment in the Western Pacific Region's health workforce. Despite progress, critical gaps remain in the number, distribution and quality of the health workforce, as well as protections to ensure safe work environments. Many countries and areas in the Region have ageing populations that increase noncommunicable disease burdens, strain health systems and create ever-growing service demands.

Meeting these challenges will require a bigger, better trained and more evenly distributed health workforce that is fit-for-purpose, with evolving skills and competencies. Drawing on the *Global strategy on human resources for health: Workforce 2030*, WHO consulted extensively with Member States to develop the draft *Regional Framework to Shape a Health Workforce for the Future of the Western Pacific*. The Framework analyses progress and bottlenecks and recommends actions to reshape the health workforce to meet the Region's expanding and diversifying needs. The Framework also addresses the need to better protect health workers as they labour to protect people from health threats. The strategic investments and collective efforts recommended will help ensure that everyone in the Region has access to the best-quality health workers.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Framework to Shape a Health Workforce for the Future of the Western Pacific*.

1. CURRENT SITUATION

There cannot be a health system without a health workforce. A motivated and competent health workforce – with the right number of workers in the right places with the right mix of skills – is central to providing people-centred integrated care and achieving WHO's ambitious Triple Billion targets, which are at the heart of the Organization's global *Thirteenth General Programme of Work*. The targets call for 1 billion more people benefiting from universal health coverage, 1 billion more people better protected from health emergencies and 1 billion more people enjoying better health and well-being. Expenditures on the health workforce are an investment, not a cost. *They directly contribute to the achievement of the health-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The global strategy on human resources for health: Workforce 2030* calls for a strengthening of the health workforce through greater investment, the realization of higher efficiency, the promotion of better governance and the enhanced use of data.

The Western Pacific Region has a diverse population, with countries and areas undergoing dramatic economic, social and demographic transitions. These transitions result in evolving health needs, with a greater burden of NCDs and chronic noncommunicable conditions, as well as the impact of population ageing. NCDs account for 87% of deaths in the Region, and that percentage could grow as the proportion of people aged 65 and above is expected to double between 2020 and 2050.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in health systems and chronic underinvestment in the health workforce. Despite progress in strengthening the health workforce, critical gaps remain in the overall number, distribution and quality of the workforce, as well as protections that ensure a safe work environment. Ageing populations, a growing NCD burden and unforeseen health emergencies require a fit-for-purpose health workforce, with evolving skills and competencies. Demand for a more agile health workforce is outpacing the number of new health workers entering service. Rethinking how health services are organized and delivered will be a key element in finding sustainable and equitable solutions.

Therefore, it is imperative to assess progress made, analyse the current landscape and revamp shared frameworks for addressing these emerging priorities effectively. The draft *Regional Framework to Shape a Health Workforce for the Future of the Western Pacific* presents five priority action areas that emerged from expert consultations in January 2023 and Member States consultations in April 2023.

The draft Regional Framework will support implementation of other recently endorsed Regional Frameworks, including those on *NCD prevention and control*, *primary health care*, *reaching the unreached*, *cervical cancer* and *mental health*. It also links with the draft frameworks for health

security and Communication for Health (C4H), both of which will be presented to the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific for endorsement in October 2023.

2. ISSUES

2.1 Investing in the health workforce to create sustainable health systems and economic gains

Strategic investment in the health workforce will deliver far-reaching health, social, economic and security benefits for Member States. More than half of government health expenditures is spent on the health workforce, which yields a massive return on investment – nine to one, according to *The Lancet*. But this fact is often overlooked. Investment in the health workforce is not a cost: it generates jobs and supports households with reliable incomes. Investing in the health workforce improves gender equity, reduces poverty, provides decent work, protects people and accelerates economic growth – directly contributing to multiple SDGs. It is a smart investment with benefits that go far beyond improved health outcomes.

2.2 Shaping and preparing a health workforce for diversifying and expanding health needs

The health needs of people are rapidly changing as the Western Pacific Region undergoes unprecedented economic, environmental, social and epidemiological transitions. NCDs now account for 87% of deaths in the Region. Health emergencies and climate change add additional risks. These changes demand a greater variety – and larger volume – of health services and a workforce to provide those services. There is an urgent need to reorient health systems towards primary health care and align the health workforce accordingly. Without transforming the Region's health systems and workforce to be more fit for the future, the Region will fail to achieve universal health coverage. Systems that provide fragmented care will be unable to address the complex health needs of the future, resulting in inefficiency, duplication of efforts, disruptions in care and increased financial burdens for individuals and national health budgets.

2.3 Protecting and supporting those who protect the people of the Region

Health workers face frequent risks, both physical and mental. Some are leaving their professions due to concerns about safety and working conditions. According to WHO estimates, more than 1000 health workers in the Region lost their lives during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (from January 2020 to May 2021). There were 1360 attacks on health care reported globally to WHO in 2022 through the [Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care](#). More than two thirds of all health-care workers in the Region are female, and safe working conditions for women are critical.

Inadequate remuneration and lack of professional and personal support underlie the inequitable distribution of health workers between rural and urban areas, public and private providers, and source and destination countries. Decent remuneration, clear career pathways and career development opportunities are required for them.

2.4 Ensuring equitable health systems and workforce, together

The mobility of the health workforce within and between countries is increasingly posing risks to the equitable distribution of the health workers. Both push and pull factors are responsible for this – including differences in remuneration, working conditions, career pathways, and personal and professional support. Education and training capacity in some low- and middle-income countries and Pacific island countries and areas remains limited. There is a need for much greater partnership and collaboration between the public and private sectors to strengthen training and comprehensive retention policies of health workers and to mitigate the impact of unmanaged worker migration. This requires a collective effort as a Region, through *The WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel*, to ensure that health services reach everyone and that a competent health workforce is accessible everywhere.

3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Framework to Shape a Health Workforce for the Future of the Western Pacific*.