

Title: Health workers' preferences and policy interventions to improve retention in rural areas in Kenya, South Africa and Thailand

Study PIs:

Overall Study:

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Kenya:

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South Africa:

- Mr Ermin Erasmus, CHP, University of the Witwatersrand

Thailand:

- Dr. Thinakorn Noree, IHPP-Thailand

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- Ms Mylene Lagarde, HEFP, LSHTM

Summary

The vast majority of poor and disadvantaged patients live in rural areas where health services are least developed. A major constraint to improving the availability and quality of health care services in rural areas is that it has proven difficult to attract and retain skilled health workers in rural health facilities. Importantly, very few of the most qualified health workers, particularly professional nurses and doctors, choose to work in such areas. Significant attention is being focused on human resource strategies to address this maldistribution but it is not clear which policy interventions would be most effective.

The overall aim of this research project is to support the identification of more effective policy interventions that will improve the recruitment and retention of health workers in rural areas. Our study will investigate the attitudes, values, preferences and early career choices of a cohort of nursing graduates in Kenya, South Africa and Thailand. A cohort of doctors will also be followed-up in Thailand.

A baseline survey will be conducted with the selected nursing and medical graduates. A self-administered questionnaire will provide information on demographic characteristics, vocational choices and health graduates' attitudes towards working in rural areas. The questionnaire will include a discrete choice experiment to investigate the students' preferences for various policy interventions that may be used to recruit health professionals to rural areas. Experimental economic games will be used to assess the altruism of health graduates and to investigate the underlying values that influence their preferences and choices about where to work. Lastly, interviews and focus group

discussions will be conducted with selected students to provide a more detailed understanding of their responses.

The study cohorts in each country will then be followed up over time to observe the actual career choices that health graduates make, to compare these choices to their initial stated preferences, and to evaluate how their preferences change after practical working experience in different settings. Regular contact will be maintained with study cohort members to limit loss to follow-up and repeat surveys will be conducted at annual intervals to answer these study questions. This proposal covers funding for follow-up for the first year but additional funding is being sought to continue the cohort study beyond the initial period.

This project will generate more in-depth knowledge about the preferences and choices of health workers with respect to working in rural areas. The key strengths of our project include:

- The combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies;
- The use of more rigorous and innovative methods for investigating values and preferences;
- A prospective cohort design to limit biases associated with cross-sectional health worker surveys;
- The observation and investigation of health graduates' actual choices over time;
- The comparison of revealed and stated preferences;
- A cross-country comparison to investigate how the likely effectiveness of policy interventions may differ in different country contexts; and
- The creation and maintenance of a health worker cohort that can be studied for some time.