

It's the workforce stupid. 5 minutes with Mark Britnell. (BMJ 2019;367:16555)

Human: Solving the Global Workforce Crisis in Healthcare

The chairman of KPMG Global Health and former NHS hospital boss outlines his blueprint for solving the healthcare workforce crisis

“I consider the workforce challenge to be the greatest crisis that healthcare faces globally. Quite simply, there is too much work and too few workers. This crisis is as large as anything we’ve ever faced in healthcare. This problem and its solution will take at least a decade, possibly a generation, to fix.

“How many times have you heard politicians around the world tell us about their love for healthcare staff but fail to provide enough for them? It’s not good enough to say we love staff. Of course we do. But we have to do something about it.

“Governments need to do four things. The first is to create more training and educational colleges. The second is to create more supply. The third is to back off ‘oversubscribing’ what tasks can be done—we’ll never get that right. And then finally, if we are to take staff from other parts of the world, we should give back.

“One day, maybe the UK can help the world confront global disease and not take nurses and doctors from India or the Philippines. When we in the UK say we need more nurses from abroad, the consequences are felt elsewhere on this planet. Let’s build colleges in India, in Africa, in South East Asia. Let’s be an advocate for universal healthcare, as we have been in the past. We’re losing that mantle to Japan, which wants to trade its technology to Africa, Asia, and India. Even if you don’t believe in the moral arguments—and we should—there’s an economic argument as well.

“We know that in other industries, technology is driving most people into lower paid work. But in the NHS, staff can be supported to be retrained. If you can just transform some of the 325 000 back office staff in the NHS into care navigators and case workers, think about what it would do for education, local communities, and patients. Health should be making long term investments in training, re-training, education, re-education, and technology. We potentially have the ability—because of our scale—to lead the world in this debate.

“The reason that some rabbits outrun foxes is because for the rabbit it is a question of life and death, but for the fox it’s merely a question of lunch. In workforce planning and healthcare, we’ve been ‘lunching’ for four decades. It’s time to see it as a life and death matter. If you don’t have enough health workers, there will be consequences. And that will mean we let down more patients, the public, and our society.”

Footnotes

- Mark Britnell was speaking at the Institute for Public Policy Research’s State of Care conference in London on 12 November. His book *Human: Solving the Global Workforce Crisis in Healthcare* was published in 2019.