

Presidential Address

Breaking the chain: Battling brain drain in histopathology in Sri Lanka

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The migration of skilled professionals from our country is not a new phenomenon, but its impact on the field of pathology is becoming increasingly profound. This exodus of talent, particularly among our brightest and most promising pathologists, threatens the very future of our specialty in Sri Lanka. Today, I would like to explore the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to this challenge.

The current state of pathology in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a proud tradition of excellence in medical education and healthcare. Our pathologists are recognized globally for their expertise, and our training programs have produced pathologists who have made significant contributions both locally and internationally. However, this success story is now under threat.

Currently, there are only 53 board-certified histopathologists serving in Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, while 20 serve in the university system under the Ministry of Higher Education. Of the 53 pathologists in the Ministry of Health, 42 histopathologists are concentrated in the Western, Central, and Southern provinces, leaving just 11 to cover the remaining provinces. Many peripheral stations are supported by senior registrars and acting pathologists prior to board certification (Figure 1)

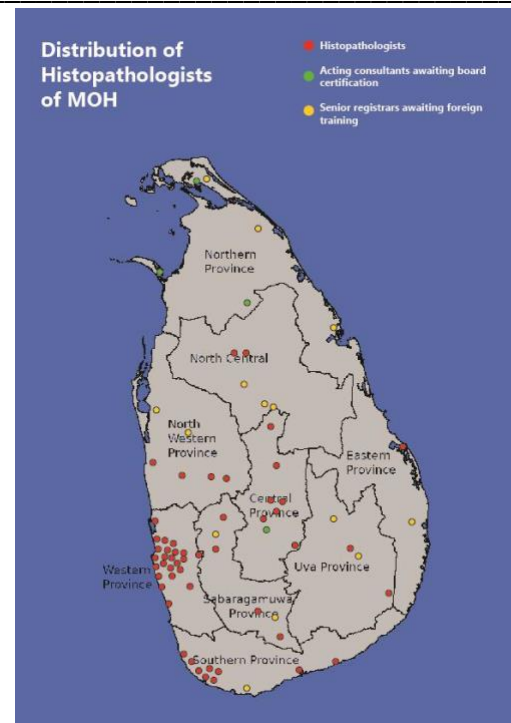


Figure 1: Distribution of histopathologists in the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka

The current ratio of pathologists in the country is 73 for a population of 23 million, meaning that one pathologist is serving approximately 315,000 people.

In 2017, the number of ministry pathologists stood at 70. Despite the expansion of the healthcare system and the increase in the number of surgeons and surgical specialties, the number of pathologists has notably decreased.

The Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM) trains about 20 pathologists annually, but only



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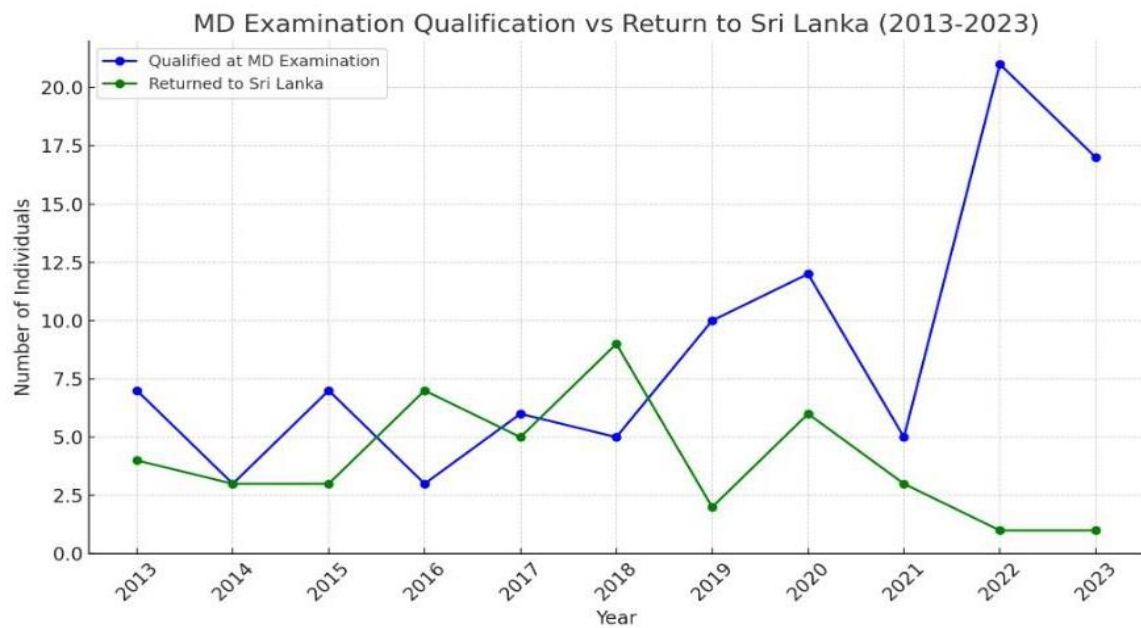


Figure 2: Comparison of numbers of histopathologists obtaining MD qualification and number returning back to Sri Lanka after overseas training 2013 - 2023

2–3 return to the country each year following foreign training, which is disheartening.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of young pathologists seeking opportunities abroad. While some may argue that this is a natural outcome of globalization, the reality is that the loss of our skilled pathologists is creating a void that is difficult to fill. The effects are felt in every corner of our healthcare system, from diagnostic delays to a decline in the quality of education and research.

The causes of brain drain

The decision to leave one's home country is never easy, and it is driven by a complex interplay of factors. Economic opportunities, better working conditions, and access to advanced technology are often cited as the primary reasons for migration. However, there are deeper issues at play.

Inadequate infrastructure, limited opportunities for career advancement, and a lack of recognition for the vital role that pathologists play in healthcare are significant

contributing factors. The challenges faced by our healthcare system, including resource constraints and administrative hurdles, also play a role in pushing our pathologists to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Moreover, the global demand for skilled pathologists, particularly in developed countries, has created an attractive pull factor. The allure of better pay, cutting-edge facilities, and the opportunity to work in well-resourced environments is hard to resist.

The consequences of brain drain

The consequences of this brain drain are far-reaching and deeply concerning. At the most immediate level, the departure of skilled pathologists leads to shortages in our healthcare system. This results in increased workloads for those who remain, leading to burnout and in some cases, further departures. Diagnostic delays in centres that are already understaffed become inevitable. Moreover, the limited opportunities for sub specialization and career advancement compound the problem, making it harder to retain talent.

The impact is also felt in our educational institutions. With fewer experienced pathologists available to teach, the quality of training for the next generation of doctors is compromised. This creates a vicious cycle where the lack of mentorship and guidance drives even more young professionals to seek opportunities abroad.

In the long term, the brain drain threatens the sustainability of our healthcare system. Without a steady pipeline of trained pathologists, we risk a decline in the quality of patient care. Furthermore, the loss of skilled pathologists hinders research and innovation, reducing our ability to contribute meaningfully to global advancements in pathology.

The human cost of brain drain

Beyond the professional and systemic consequences, we must also consider the human cost of brain drain. For every pathologist who leaves, there is a family left behind, a community that loses a contributor, and a nation that loses a valuable asset.

The loss of our skilled pathologists is a sad reminder of the challenges that we face as a nation. It reflects the systemic issues that need to be addressed, but it is also a call to action. We must do more to create an environment where our pathologists can thrive, where they feel valued, and where they see a future for themselves and their families in Sri Lanka.

Possible solutions and the way forward

Addressing the brain drain among pathologists requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted strategy. It starts with a commitment to improving working conditions and career prospects for pathologists in Sri Lanka. This includes investing in infrastructure, ensuring access to the latest technology, and offering opportunities for continuous professional development.

Equally important is fostering a culture of recognition and respect for the critical role pathologists play in healthcare. Advocacy and collaboration with stakeholders across the healthcare system are key to this effort. Raising awareness about the significance of pathology will help to instill a sense of pride and purpose within the profession.

International collaboration and exchange programs are another avenue we should explore. By allowing pathologists to gain valuable experience abroad while maintaining strong connections to Sri Lanka, we can create a global network of Sri Lankan pathologists. This network can leverage the expertise of our diaspora and encourage them to contribute to the ongoing development of our healthcare system.

Incentive programs are also essential. We should develop both financial and non-financial rewards for pathologists who choose to work in underserved or remote areas. These incentives could include scholarships, concessionary loans, housing support, and clear career advancement opportunities.

Finally, return migration programs can play a pivotal role in reversing the brain drain. These initiatives would encourage healthcare professionals who have migrated abroad to return after a set period, bringing back their skills and experience. Offering rewards to those who return, while structuring bond payments for those who opt to remain abroad, would create a balanced system that supports both individual choices and the country's needs.

Finally, we must address the root causes of migration by working to improve the overall socio-economic conditions in our country. This requires a collective effort, not just from the healthcare sector but from all levels of government and society.