

Letter to the Editor**Need for Change in the Current Crisis of Brain Drain of Health Care Professionals in Sri Lanka****Dharmasiri, A. D. U.***Teaching Hospital Ratnapura, Sri Lanka*

Brain drain refers to the emigration or migration of individuals in search of better professional opportunities or a higher standard of living in another country. This phenomenon can be driven by push factors such as adverse economic conditions, unemployment, low wages, lack of social freedom, and unstable political governance. On the other hand, pull factors like higher wages, better quality of life, and increased personal freedom also contribute (Young, 2021). Sri Lanka is currently facing this critical issue, particularly in the healthcare sector, due to many of these reasons. This article will explore key areas that could help reduce the brain drain of healthcare professionals in Sri Lanka.

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How Does Brain Drain Happen?

Brain drain is a significant concern for many developing countries, with Sri Lanka ranking among the worst in terms of immigrant-to-population ratio. In contrast, countries like Canada, Australia, the United States, Europe, and New Zealand rank much higher (Adkoli, 2006). Although Sri Lanka provides free education, nearly 20,000 to 40,000, Sri Lankan undergraduates are currently studying abroad, representing a substantial loss of talent. Many of these students are from leading government schools and may never return to the country. Most are between the ages of 25 and 39, meaning a significant portion of those who benefited from free education are now employed abroad, leaving Sri Lanka with a low human resource capacity (Silva et al., 2013). According to World Bank data from 2018, Sri Lanka faces a shortage of skilled healthcare professionals, with only 1.004 doctors and 2.18 nurses or midwives per 1,000 patients. Each year, around 60 doctors leave for the UK, Canada, or Australia for their one-year compulsory training, and many do not return, leading to a growing crisis in local healthcare services. While accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, between 1993 and 1996, 13% of doctors

left Sri Lanka, and from 1997 to 2000, the figure rose to 28%. Initially, many nurses migrated to Middle Eastern countries, but they have since shifted to the UK, Canada, and Australia due to the higher demand and salary rates in these developed nations. Despite the extensive benefits of free education, the current economic crisis and political instability have led many healthcare professionals to prioritize personal advancement over contributing to their homeland.

How Does This Affect Healthcare in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka, a middle-income country, dedicates 4% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to healthcare and, like many other countries, faces a shortage of healthcare workers. Recently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched various programs encouraging government professionals to migrate and earn foreign currency to help solve the country's dollar crisis. The government has extended the two-year leave period to five years to facilitate migration and has spent public funds for training health professionals urging them to earn foreign currency and send remittances back to Sri Lanka. However, this short-sighted approach is worsening the brain drain, as most trainees do not return when their services are needed (Dias & Eliatamby, 2021). Sri Lanka has the

highest proportion of older adults in South Asia, with 12.3% of its population aged 60 or older. By 2030, this figure is expected to rise to over 25%. This aging population will lead to increased retirements, reduced workforce numbers, lower productivity, and decreased tax revenue and savings. The growing demand for aged care services and the strain on free healthcare will require significant investment by the Ministry of Health to maintain quality care by 2030. Developed countries are actively hiring Sri Lankan nurses to work in critical care and geriatric care roles for their aging populations, creating a pull factor for migration. While this provides international job opportunities for Sri Lankan healthcare professionals, it leaves the country with unmet needs for specialists and resources to care for its own aging population. The government may not be able to meet the rising healthcare costs (Kularathne & Samarathunga, 2021). Additionally, many experienced healthcare professionals in specialized fields are migrating to meet the demand abroad, leading to a decline in the quality of local healthcare. As senior professionals leave due to economic burdens, only a few remain to guide junior staff. However,

every profession requires senior expertise to mentor newcomers and uphold ethical standards in professional practice (Masau et al., 2010). The extension of the retirement age to 65 has also negatively impacted the younger generation, limiting their opportunities for promotions, training, and salary increases. Although the number of healthcare professionals trained each year falls short of the country's needs, the government has not implemented adequate measures to retain them. Currently, there is a severe shortage of essential drugs and medical resources throughout Sri Lanka, with the government seeking assistance from foreign countries. At the same time, Sri Lanka is marketing its healthcare professionals overseas as a short-term solution to its foreign exchange problems. In the near future, the country may face a crisis where its most talented professionals are not contributing to its healthcare system.

Suggestions to Address the Brain Drain

1. **Government investment in higher education:** Lack of access to quality training and fewer opportunities for advanced education are key factors driving brain drain. The government should focus on creating strategies to retain skilled professionals by offering

better employment opportunities and facilities.

2. **Clear career pathways and competitive salaries:** Both government and private healthcare training institutions should establish clear career pathways, with competitive salaries that reward hard work, teamwork, and innovation. Rapid promotions should be available by the time individuals reach their 40s.

3. **Improving national systems:** The quality of education, healthcare, and the economy in Sri Lanka must be improved through appropriate reforms.

4. **Reimbursement arrangements:**

The government should mandate reimbursement from professionals who leave the country after receiving free education. Clear employment regulations should also be established for all healthcare workers

5. **Political and economic reform:**

Strengthening political and economic systems is crucial to discouraging emigration. The government must enhance governance, reduce corruption, and ensure political stability

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