

Melbourne Independent Media Center

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Stealing hope from the third world

by A Nurse *Thursday July 15, 2004 at 11:35 PM*

Belief that it is wrong to stop humans from going anywhere they please is tearing societies apart as well qualified workers leave those who depend upon them for dead and fail to fight for rights at home.

This article is about an article which appeared in the New York times.

An Exodus of African Nurses Puts Infants and the Ill in Peril

By Celia W. Dugger

The New York Times, July 12, 2004

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/12/international/africa/12MALA.html>

Dugger writes about a rise in fatalities and suffering accompanying childbirth in Malawi. There are almost no doctors and all the nurses are emigrating to first world countries because the conditions are so bad at home.

Instead of assisting hospitals and communities in the third world to retain the staff they train, the first world is poaching them and getting its skilled labor for free.

If you read the article you will see a quote of how a British spokes person for nurses refuses to counter the problem, stating that to stop people crossing borders is an infringement of human rights.

This is the kind of moralistic cant by which our world is unravelling. Humans and other animals have always encountered limits. The prospect of flying thousands of km away has only been commercially available in the past 50 years. And it won't be for much longer.

At any rate, have a read through the below which I have cut arbitrarily, and consider taking a look at the whole thing at the NY Times.

A nurse who perceives that the same thing will happen here as we allow our system to run down by importing people rather than fixing the situation here.

LILONGWE, Malawi -- Six women suddenly went into the final, agonized minutes of childbirth. Hlalapi Kunkeyani was the only nurse. There were no doctors.

Panicky cries rent the fetid air of the ward, a cavernous space jammed with 20 women laboring in beds, on benches, even on the concrete floor. Mrs. Kunkeyani worked with intense concentration, her face glowing with sweat, but she was overwhelmed.

Four of the babies arrived in a rush without her to ease their passage into the world. She found one trapped between his mother's legs with the umbilical cord wrapped around his chest. The face of another was smeared with his mother's feces. Yet a third lay still on his mother's breast,

desperate to breathe. The nurse swiftly suctioned his tiny mouth until at last he gulped a breath.

Mrs. Kunkeyani, 36, is the stalwart nurse in charge of this capital city's main labor ward, where 10 overworked nurse midwives deliver more than 10,000 babies a year. But soon, she will vanish from this impoverished nation, joining thousands of African nurses streaming away from their AIDS-haunted continent for rich countries, primarily Britain.

"My friends are telling me there's work there, there's money there," said Mrs. Kunkeyani, who will soon make in a day's overtime in Britain what she earns in a month in Malawi. "They're telling me I'm wasting my time here."

The nursing staffs of public health systems across the poor countries of Africa grossly insufficient to begin with are being battered by numerous factors that include attrition and AIDS. But none are creating greater anxiety in Africa than the growing flight of nurses discouraged by low pay and grueling conditions.

The result of the nursing crisis the neglect of the sick is starkly apparent here on the dilapidated wards of Lilongwe Central Hospital, where a single nurse often looks after 50 or more desperately ill people. What is equally visible is the boon to Britain, where Lilongwe Central's former nurses minister to the elderly in the carpeted lounges of nursing homes and to patients in hushed private hospital rooms.

It is the poor subsidizing the rich, since African governments paid to educate many of the health care workers who are leaving.

In May, African countries banded together at the annual assembly of the World Health Organization to urge developed nations to compensate them for their lost investment. After an intense debate, the assembled countries resolved to search for ways to lessen the damage of what they called increasing rates of emigration.

The brain drain of health professionals from Africa, and, more broadly, the severe staffing shortages, will be an issue at the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok. Physicians for Human Rights, a Boston-based nonprofit group that shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, will be releasing a report on the topic and proposing steps to avert a deepening of the human resources crisis.

At Lilongwe Central, an 830-bed hospital, there are supposed to be 532 nurses. Only 183 are left. That is about half as many as there were just six years ago. And only 30 of those are registered nurses, the highly skilled cadre that is most sought abroad.

The hospital's director, Dr. Damson Kathyola, a peasant's son educated at University College London, seems to feel an almost physical pain when he describes trying to run a major medical institution that is hemorrhaging nurses.

"Unbearable," he said, leaning his head back and squeezing his eyes shut.
"Unbearable."

In Malawi, afflicted with one of Africa's most severe nursing shortages, almost two-thirds of the nursing jobs in the public health system are vacant. More registered nurses have left to work abroad in the past four years than the 336 who remain in the public hospitals and clinics that serve most of the country's 11.6 million people, according to Malawi's Nurses and Midwives Council.

Many of these English-speaking nurses have flocked to Britain, which is confronting its own acute shortage of nurses to care for an aging population. Its central nursing register shows that the number of nurses being certified from Malawi, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana all former British colonies has soared since 1999.

African nurses are also migrating, though in smaller numbers, to the United States and New Zealand, with trickles to Australia and Canada. There are now more than 3,100 registered nurses from Africa in the United States, according to a national survey of nurses by the Department of Health and Human Services.

As projections show the shortfall of nurses in the United States ballooning to 800,000 by 2020, the pressure to recruit abroad is likely to grow.

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