

16. Building migrant-sensitive health-care systems: the role of human resources

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Introduction

The EU continues to receive significant numbers of refugees and migrants and their needs remain complex. Assistance tailored to their needs is essential for their smooth and successful integration, which is not only a humanitarian obligation but also of clear economic benefit. The need is clear for specially trained professionals capable of coping with this complex, multidisciplinary task – where health, human rights and intercultural aspects intersect. However, there is a significant shortage in formal higher education programmes to build the human resource capacity of properly trained staff who can address this challenge.

EUPHA published its statement on migration, ethnicity and health in May 2018 (1). The revision in October 2018 (2) states on the issue of human resource capacity-building (point 7, covering better provision of education and training in migrant and ethnic minority health):

Although this Statement is primarily concerned with the links between research and policy-making on MEM [migrant and ethnic minority] health, capacity building in both areas has to be supported by education and training directed at health workers of all kinds, researchers, managers and policy makers. This should not only be provided in optional additional courses, but as part of basic curricula.

Building the capacity of medical students at the University of Pécs Medical School

In response to this recognition and the need for human resource capacity-building as an essential component of migrant-sensitive health-care systems, the University of Pécs Medical School (the site of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Migration Health Training and Research since 2017) began to incorporate migration-related health and public health elements into its training programmes for medical students. Catering for students from more than 50 countries, the training is provided simultaneously in three languages: English, German and Hungarian. The courses are currently offered at three levels: optional courses, compulsory courses and postgraduate studies.

Optional one-semester courses

Optional courses are offered twice in each academic year, with 28 lectures over 14 weeks in English and Hungarian. Each study group comprises approximately 30 students. The course covers the following subjects:

- migration health and travel medicine
- new migration health challenges in the EU health-care system
- health aspects of humanitarian assistance
- special aspects in health assistance of Roma and ethnic minority communities
- primary health care and migration.

In addition to formal lectures, roundtable discussions, analysis of movies and role-play are part of the training.

Compulsory courses integrated into the regular medical curriculum

About 400 students from around 52 countries attend lecturers and seminars (taught in English, German and Hungarian) each academic year in the following subject areas:

- health aspects of migration in primary health care and family medicine
- occupational health aspects of migration.

Postgraduate course: Specialist in Migration Health

The postgraduate Specialist in Migration Health course is a four-semester training programme, generating 120 credits on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (calculated from the required workload of the students). This is sufficient for a master's degree under the System. The pilot phase of the programme was launched in the 2018–2019 academic year and is based on a form of problem-based learning: it mixes face-to-face training with distance learning and includes as a basic requirement the development of skills in team working while completing tasks during the distance learning period under the supervisions of tutors. The programme has been developed within the framework of the CHANCE project. The CHANCE consortium of six academic institutions (coordinated by the University of Pécs and co-financed by the EU's Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme) aims to address gaps in the higher education system across the EU.

The consortium has developed a masters of science curriculum that focuses on the new challenges arising from the increasing ethnic, cultural and language diversity of refugees and migrants. The course covers a number of fields, including direct health assistance, migrant-sensitive health care and health-care system planning, health policy, applied sociology, economics/health economics and the importance of intercultural competences. Even the entry criteria of the programme reflect its intersectoral approach: not only are health and public health professionals welcome to apply but so are candidates with honours degrees in other fields, such as social and economic sciences, military and law enforcement, teacher training and public administration.

The curriculum provides motivation and orientation, knowledge and skills for postgraduate students and health, public health and social care professionals who are intending to assist, treat, care and refer refugees and migrants; design, plan and implement health and social care programmes for refugees and migrants and their integration; and/or undertake research related to refugee and migrant health. The development of each academic module has been led by a single partner but reflects the joint efforts of all partners. The academic content is built around six core competences:

- epidemiology and research methodology (University of East Anglia, United Kingdom);
- environmental medicine and occupational health (University of Pécs, Hungary);
- economic/health economic impact of migration (University of Pécs, Hungary);
- organization and systems management (Danube University Krems, Austria);
- clinical and public health assessment (Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice, Slovakia); and
- social and behavioural aspects of migration, including multicultural and multireligious aspects and their health/mental health impact (University Medicine Greifswald, Germany).

Training development

Refugees and migrants make up a significant part of the EU population, and both regular and irregular migrants continue to arrive. Refugees and migrants reflect their countries of origin in terms of morbidity profile and public health conditions, as well as in their cultural and religious heritage. Organizations at the highest political and professional level have repeatedly stressed the need to develop institutional (migrant-sensitive health-care systems) and human resource capacity in order to address this challenge.

One of the core elements of any training development is also missing at European level: to ensure that data on refugees and migrant health is standardized and comparable.

While some important – mostly individual – efforts aimed at fulfilling the challenges do exist, until now, there has been an absence of any truly comprehensive programme, even in the most essential area: to ensure an adequate supply of trained staff who are able to transform existing systems into systems that are more sensitive to the needs of refugees and migrants.

Civil organizations engaged in the general and health assistance of refugees and migrants have recognized the contradictions between migration-related policy and practice and it is clear that there is an urgent need for action based on good scientific evidence. The Migrant and Ethnic Minority Health Section of EUPHA took part in preparations for the first Global Conference on Migration, Race, Ethnicity and Health, held in Edinburgh, United Kingdom, in May 2018. That was an excellent opportunity to compose and launch a declaration that was first broadly discussed within the frame of the Section's Board, and then accepted by the EUPHA Presidency. The EUPHA statement highlighted all the important areas requiring more action, including research and databases to support evidence-informed action for refugee and migrant health. The Section's members supported the May 2018 Declaration, which underlined the importance of training for researchers, health workers, managers and policy-makers as their efforts are essential for improving knowledge in this field. Educational programmes are needed that give adequate attention to migrant and ethnic minority health, not just in the form of one-off training and refresher courses but also integrated into the basic curriculum of all the disciplines involved (1). The Declaration emphasized the role and responsibility of higher education institutions in integrating the core elements of migration and refugee and migrant health into their programmes.

Most of the literature relating to human resources capacity-building is in agreement with the Declaration in highlighting its importance and the need to incorporate it into the regular undergraduate programmes of health and public health professionals. It also highlights the need to train a relevant nonhealth workforce as well (3) – all of which the University of Pécs Medical School plans to pursue.

References

1. Migration, ethnicity and health. Statement drafted by the Section for Migration, Ethnicity and Health of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) 9th May 2018. Utrecht: European Public Health Association; 2018 (https://ephconference.eu/repository/sections/migr/EUPHA_statement_9th_May_2018a_revised.pdf, accessed 7 July 2019).
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3. Szilard I, Marek E, Katz Z. Developing training in migration health: University of Pécs Medical School. Public Health Panorama. 2016;2(4):540–543 (http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/330564/Panorama-Full-Volume2-Issue4-december-2016.pdf?ua=1, accessed 7 July 2019).