Better leadership and management in health

No large organisation can thrive without strong leadership and management – yet these are largely neglected in the health sectors of low-income countries. HLSP Institute was commissioned by WHO to facilitate a global consultative meeting about raising the profile of leadership and management in health and development.

The Millennium Development Goals challenge low-income countries to significantly improve the health status of their populations – through better coverage and access to priority health services. None of this can be done without strong management and leadership. Whilst 'poor management' is often cited as a constraint to expanding effective healthcare, there are few examples of systematic and large scale efforts to improve healthcare management.

Participants at a global meeting recently convened by WHO reported that current efforts often only tackle parts of a complex problem. A comprehensive strategy would need to address four key areas:

The management cadre
Does the country know who its health managers are, or are they only classified in the personnel database for example, as doctors or nurses? Is there any career structure for managers? Most managers need to combine clinical practice and management responsibilities, and therefore have complex professional development needs.

Support systems
Managers cannot work effectively without basic support systems that ensure that people, money and goods are in the right place at the right time. Whose job is it to initiate a full-scale systems reform when a support service is dysfunctional?

The working environment
What motivates effective management? Are managers supported in their work, do they feel valued, or do they tend to be undermined by their bosses, local politicians or other ministries? What can be done in practice to improve the working environment of health managers?

Competences
What competences does a manager really need? Does the health sector address this question systematically? Is there adequate communication about this between employers and training institutions?

What are management capacities?

At the meeting a set of good practice principles for strengthening leadership and management were agreed. Many participants stated their intent to use the framework to develop proposals for investment for management and leadership development. More information on the meeting outcomes, and links to other management topics and materials can be found on the WHO website.

Financial management
One of the background papers for the global consultation, prepared by Caterina Waddington of the HLSP Institute, explores the practical challenges facing managers. For example, many managers found it difficult to juggle the multiple bank accounts they hold – often due to government and development agencies acting separately. District health managers also feel that they are expected to raise money for their own services – largely from fees for patients. This issue is almost never addressed in management strengthening activities.

The full paper, Economics and financial management: what do district managers need to know? is available on the WHO website along with others at www.who.int