



Commonwealth Secretariat

Briefing Note – Health

The challenge

The Commonwealth faces a number of significant health challenges that require concerted action, including:

- A shortage of health care professionals in many member countries.
- An increase in maternal and infant mortality rates in many Commonwealth Sub-Saharan African countries, as well as in Commonwealth Asia and South Pacific.
- The lack of financial and human resources for delivery of health care services.
- The impact of climate change on human health.
- The restriction on implementation of interventions due to the spread of HIV and the stigma surrounding AIDS.
- An increase in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease due to changes in lifestyle and diet.

The Commonwealth strategy

- To mobilise funding for advocacy initiatives to create awareness on national, regional and global health policies.
- To provide analysis and policy advice to member countries.
- The undertaking of research on migration trends of health professionals to promote policies for return migration.
- To increase the number of health workers with midwifery skills.
- Seeking ways to improve access to health services, strengthening management information and training health personnel.
- Exploring the risks to human health posed by climate change, and ways of managing these risks.

Key principles

We collaborate with all stakeholders to implement projects which recognise that healthy individuals are central to social and economic development.

The practical response

- The Commonwealth Secretariat has worked with partners to develop an Advanced Midwifery degree which is now in its first year at the University of Malawi, with 15 students currently enrolled.

- Through the Commonwealth Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health Workers, we work with health ministries to help with health workforce migration.
- The Secretariat organised workshops to raise awareness about the code and promote its implementation.
- Assistance for recruitment and retention strategies has been given to Nigeria, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Cameroon.
- In November 2008, we held an Advisory Group Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases and are working towards raising the profile of such diseases.
- The Secretariat is involved in the development of e-health as a key tool that will bring solutions to major health issues.
- The first project on e-health began in Kenya in October 2008. Kenya's first national e-health strategy was completed in August 2009 and was accepted as part of the ministerial reforms.
- The Secretariat brings together Commonwealth law ministers and attorneys-general to address legal issues preventing the achievement of HIV/AIDS Universal Access targets.
- At the second United Nations General Assembly High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS held in 2006, countries agreed to work towards achieving universal access by 2010.

Ministerial meetings or other highlights

Commonwealth health ministers held their annual meeting in May 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland, under the theme of 'Health and Climate Change'.

The 2010 Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting will address 'The Challenge of Meeting the Millennium Development Goals'.

Other Commonwealth players and their work

We collaborate with Commonwealth environment ministers, Commonwealth law ministers and attorneys-general, and the Commonwealth Advisory Group on Non-Communicable Diseases.

Relations with other bodies involved in the sector

We work with the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, International Labour Organization, United Nations Development Programme, and Microsoft, the Open Society, and Cisco Systems. We also work with governments, civil society, schools of medicine, public health organisations and nurses.