

MEDICS IN DIASPORA: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS, SDUI AND SAA AS AN EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper aims to illustrate the potential benefits of partnerships between medical societies in the diaspora and Sudan, with particular reference to the existing partnership between the Sudan Doctors Union of Ireland (SDUI) and the Sudan Anaesthetists Association (SAA) over the last four years.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The paper will look into different projects which were initiated/carried out by the two bodies and its potential impact on the medical training and health services in Sudan.

Findings: Transfer of knowledge by Sudanese medics in the diaspora with/without the assistance of academic faculties abroad is feasible, cost-effective and has sound results in improving medical training standards and – indirectly – health services standards in their home country.

Originality/Value: This paper shares the experience of two relatively young organisations in arranging the transfer of knowledge, skills and capacity-building within a minimum budget, which could be replicated by others.

Keywords: Sudan; Ireland; anaesthesia; knowledge transfer; projects.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, diaspora or expatriate communities, including migrants as well as second or third generation immigrants who maintain ties with their parents' or grandparents' homeland, have received increasing policy attention as part of the international discourse on international migration and development (Plaza and Ratha, 2011). Many diaspora communities maintain transnationalities; connecting countries and communities. They can call on multiple networks, relate to different identities and share a sense of belonging to more than one community and country (Omelaniuk, 2013). In addition to that, a number of countries have mobilised skills amongst diaspora professionals through international programmes such as the IOM's Migration for Development in Africa programme (MIDA) (IOM, 2004) and the UNDP's Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) programme that operates under the United Nations Volunteer Programme. These programmes seek to place professionals in public and private institutions within key development sectors. In Sudan, the TOKTEN has managed to recruit 136 experienced expatriates to build up the capacity of 5892 personnel (UNDP, 2013).

SUDAN DOCTORS UNION OF IRELAND (SDUI)

The SDUI represents doctors of Sudanese background who are working and living in Ireland. The Union was established in June 2010. It started as a small extension of the Sudanese Doctors Union in UK and Ireland (SDU UK&I). In its 2014 annual report, the Irish Medical Council revealed that the number of doctors practising in Ireland who are graduates of Sudanese Universities has risen to 549, almost ten-fold increase from a decade ago (Irish Medical Council, 2014).

The main objectives of the SDUI are the welfare of its members, and to take a leading role in the development of health services and medical training in Sudan, through fostering academic relationships between academic institutions and health service delivery agencies in Ireland and Sudan.

Projects and activities

Since its establishment, SDUI has been engaged with a number of medical speciality societies in Sudan, most notably the Sudan Anaesthetists Association (SAA). This has led to mutual benefits for both sides, including facilitation of knowledge transfer, capacity building and fund raising for much needed equipment. This relationship has faced many obstacles and hurdles: technical, financial and logistic issues that it has overcome successfully. Examples of these activities include:

The Anaesthesia MD preparation courses: higher training in anaesthesia in Sudan is run by the Sudan Medical Specialisation Board (SMSB). It is a four-year modular training program with an exit exam at the end, after which successful candidates are awarded a MD in anaesthesia and registered as specialists by the Sudan Medical Council (SMC). The SDUI anaesthetic group has been actively involved in the candidates' preparation for these exams, along with educators from the College of Anaesthetists in Ireland. Sudanese anaesthetists working in Ireland and the UK made annual trips before the exam. Didactic lectures, interactive discussion groups and mock exams were held for candidates. Parallel to that, intensive training and round table discussions were held with examiners from the SMSB on how to develop the exam so as to match international standards. Negotiations are currently under way to nominate Khartoum as an overseas centre for the College of Anaesthetists exams.

Sudan Lifebox Initiative (SLI): The SLI is an enthusiastic initiative between the SDUI and the SAA to provide basic monitoring to all operating theatres in Sudan. Phase one of this project involved covering operating theatres in Khartoum State, censuses of 17 hospitals revealed a shortage of 50 basic monitoring devices. The SDUI contacted the Lifebox Foundation in London to facilitate training and procurement of the devices. The SDUI also embarked on a large campaign for fund raising and managed to raise 3000 Euros internally, to date, which will cover the cost of 15 devices.

Those wishing to contribute to this initiative or who require need more information, may visit the website www.sdui.org/lifebox.

Basic Assessment and Support in Intensive Care (BASIC) Course: the aim of the BASIC course is to teach participants to rapidly assess seriously ill patients and provide initial treatment and organ support. The course was conducted in Soba Hospital, in conjunction with Ireland Intensive Care Society, a faculty that included six consultant intensivists. It was attended by 80 participants and received encouraging feedback. Similar follow-up courses were carried out by other medical groups in the diaspora for example, the Sudanese American Medical Association (SAMA).

Advanced Surgeries: Medical missions are organised on ad hoc basis to specialised centres in Khartoum and Medani, for example, cardiac centres, to help carry out complicated surgeries. This is also used as an opportunity for knowledge transfer, that is, 'on-the-job' training opportunity.

Obstetric Anaesthesia Symposium: In February 2015, the SDUI in conjunction with SAA organised the First Obstetric Anaesthesia Symposium in Khartoum. It was attended by more than a 100 participants who underwent hands-on training on common obstetric emergencies and procedures. At the end of the symposium, an obstetric anaesthesia society was formed with plans to hold more educational meetings and training in the future.

CONCLUSION

Socio-economic and political factors have led many doctors to emigrate from Sudan to Ireland and other part of the West and the Gulf regions. However, and despite this leading to loss of human capacity and brain drain, it brings along opportunities for bilateral and multinational cooperation.

The SDUI and SAA are among many other organisations with the same man date sharing these experiences may help in coordinating efforts and minimising redundancies. Indeed, under such programmes, the return of diaspora members to their countries of origin may not necessarily be long term: assignments can be shorter term and now increasingly diaspora members are engaging on a 'virtual' basis through online mentoring and support from a distance. Such programmes have generally been assessed as being successful in transferring knowledge and skills to targeted institutions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sohel M.G. Ahmed is a Consultant Anaesthetist and Intensive Care Physician in Sligo Regional Hospital in west of Ireland. Currently, he is the sitting president of Sudan Doctors Union of Ireland (SDUI).