

Editorial

The impact of the exodus of professionals on the Sri Lankan Paediatric Healthcare

Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2023; **53**(2): 93-94

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/slch.v53i2.11028>

(Key words: Exodus of professionals, Sri Lanka, Paediatric healthcare)

Caught up in the drastic, woeful, and persistent throes of a fiscal bankruptcy with major economic fallouts, as well as the escalating cost of living and fluctuating inflation, coupled with unbearable direct and indirect taxation, our Motherland Sri Lanka has seen a catastrophic migration of learned professionals to many other countries over the last couple of years. They have elected to leave the country, seeking greener pastures abroad, for a variegated plethora of reasons. Sadly, this includes their inability to make ends meet with their monthly remunerations. Political instability, shortages of essential drugs, poor quality of medicines, inequities of treatment meted out to professionals, and rampant corruption at many levels too, have contributed to the experts in different fields making these binding and enduring decisions to leave their motherland for good. Many of them are probably leaving this country with some misgivings but are perhaps forced to do so through the force of circumstances and in search of a better life elsewhere on this planet.

It needs to be reiterated here that these erudite professionals who have been trained in various disciplines to reach the highest scholarly levels are mostly people who have benefitted from the free educational systems of our country. Of course, they are at very high levels academically and belong to intelligence echelons way above the average. They have made the most of the facilities provided by our country and risen to the top. The undeniable truth is that up to now this country has unreservedly given them the opportunities to excel to the absolute maximum level in their professional lives.

The scenario of this exodus of professionals, colloquially referred to as the 'brain drain', also includes all grades of healthcare professionals in the Sri Lankan Government Ministry of Health. The inevitable consequence is the drastic effect it is certain to have on the care that is provided in state hospitals. The brunt of the consequences has been seen to be due to the severe shortage of doctors including Specialist Consultants, brought on by *en masse* emigration of medical personnel. Sadly, once considered to be one of the best in the region, providing remarkable healthcare even with very few resources, Sri Lanka's Healthcare System is now ailing. It has been laid low by the departure of hundreds of doctors with scores of patients left languishing in the doldrums¹. The Government Medical Officers Association, a trade union of doctors, has gone on record to say that over 1700 doctors have left the country over the last two years. That is quite a significant number for a small country like ours. A report from the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health has declared that over 4200 doctors have obtained "Certificates of Good Standing" from the Sri Lanka Medical Council, a mandatory internationally valid document certifying the professional status of individuals, in just one year between June 2022 and July 2023, indicating that they too are thinking about leaving². The

same report also revealed that more than 5,000 doctors had acquired medical licences from Britain, Australia and countries in the Middle East, and a similar number has reserved slots to sit for foreign licensing examinations this year and in 2025². These details imply that these doctors too may perhaps leave the country in due course, as these statistics are proxy indicators of their future intentions.

In addition to the drastic effects these phenomena are likely to have on the health service in general, it is likely to have a profound effect on paediatric healthcare. We envisage these to be problems that would affect both the curative as well as the preventive sectors. In Sri Lanka, paediatric healthcare in the curative and preventive health sectors is quite strong and has a robust time-tested profile. However, at present, the services are being maintained with considerable difficulty. The standards and levels of child healthcare are most likely to suffer further in the not-too-distant future as a result of a depletion of trained human resources. This is particularly so in the most remote areas of the country, which are at greatest risk of suffering the most, and to add to their woes, these are the very same areas where the poorest of the poor live. The deficiencies of services are currently seen quite significantly in some of the sub-specialties of paediatrics, with particular implications in Paediatric Cardiology, Paediatric Intensive Care and Neonatology, just to name a few. All these developments in the realm of child healthcare are of considerable concern to the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians and its membership, as that organisation represents highly qualified specialist personnel who are entrusted with the healthcare of Sri Lankan children.


The most disturbing aspect of this entire saga is the lethargic and even could-not-care-less type of attitudes of the powers that be, on this adversity that is looming over the horizon. They do not seem to contribute to the time-tested adage that health is indeed wealth and the desperate need to act decisively to look after the healthcare scenario of our country. In a laughable turn of events in November 2013, the then Minister of Health threatened to take draconian measures against healthcare workers going for employment in other countries without approval from the Ministry of Health³. This met a very strong response from the Health Service Trade Unions which managed to torpedo and scupper that proposed initiative and nip it in the bud. The legislators should realise, at the very least, that they need to try and take some meaningful steps to mitigate against the potential damage that may be caused by the depletion of human resources and try their best to stem the tide of the exodus of trained personnel. Towards that end, the professionals need to be unequivocally assured that their future and that of their families are safe, fruitful and that they would be assured of a gratifying life if they remain in our country. Unfortunately, that

contention is perhaps wishful thinking and even a far cry from what our professionals truly deserve.

Sri Lanka, even over the last few years, has managed to secure amazing achievements in paediatric care and manifest even unbelievable child healthcare statistics. Our Motherland has managed to depict improvements in healthcare that have been the envy of even the entire world. These fabulous triumphs in paediatric care have been achieved as a result of the excellent services provided by dedicated professional healthcare workers. It is our well-considered contention that we cannot, and should not, under any circumstance, allow any deterioration of healthcare services that should be provided to the children, as the future of our country rests firmly in their hands.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest
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