
From COVID-19 to “JAPA”

In Nigeria, "JAPA" refers to emigration for “greener pastures” especially in reference to young individuals who in search of better opportunities have decided to relocate abroad to improve their lots. Although the internet has ascribed an acronym status to the term as representing "Just Another Person Abroad" or "Just Absconding Probably to Abroad", the original word comes from the Nigerian language meaning to escape! There are multiple perspectives on the push-pull factors for the emigration of professionals, but in the Dentistry/oral health context, the implications are rather serious.

As young dental professionals flee the country, the immediate implication is brain drain in the dental/oral health sector. With the already poor outlook of oral health indices in Nigeria, the effect of this further shortage is rather frightening. The mass exodus of dental professionals limits the availability and accessibility of dental services in Nigeria especially in the rural and underserved communities. The obvious result is reduced access and increased unmet dental/oral health needs among our teeming populations.

It is projected that the remaining workforce will suffer decreased morale and be “tempted” to emigrate at the earliest opportunity. Even those who decide to stay back are likely to suffer burnout from increased workload. Emigration creates a skills gap within the local dental workforce which is difficult to fill in the short term. As with decreased moral, taking on unhealthy workloads is a likely natural consequence with the attendant problems.

Emigrating dentists do so with their skills and expertise. The impact on the development of dentistry in the areas of capacity building, research and future planning is colossal! Nigeria must improve the working conditions of its dentists through governmental and non-governmental interventions and collaboration. Private-public partnership needs to be intensified and job opportunities must be increased to give young dentists hope in Nigeria.

Above all, there must be a national reorientation to teach Nigerians to believe in Nigeria and express confidence in its future. Leadership at all levels must show a commitment to an egalitarian unified, corruption-free, merit-based country. Then and only then will we stem the tide of the current deluge of harmful emigration!

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