

Counting the opportunity cost of abandoning the omnibus Health Professions Authority

The South Sudan Medical Council Bill, once approved, will improve the regulatory framework for health professionals. It will facilitate registration and licensing of health professionals including doctors, dentists and pharmacists. In turn this should enhance patient safety and quality of care delivered in the country.

Twenty two years of civil war ruined the healthcare system in South Sudan. Government provides only 15% of health services with the remaining 85% coming from non-Government organizations (NGO's), the quality of NGO and private sector services is unknown. With Independence in 2011 and a new constitution an opportunity to develop robust regulations for the health sector has arisen.

One of the main challenges facing the private healthcare sector in South Sudan is the absence of a regulatory body for registration of health professionals, especially those with foreign qualifications. The Medical Council Bill addresses this challenge. Other than medical doctors, dentists and pharmacists it does not cover other health professionals such as Nurses and Midwives, Public Health Professionals and Allied Health Professionals.

Cognizant of the severe lack of medical doctors who are the only cadre currently performing surgical, obstetrics and gynecological operations the Ministry of Health resorted to a task shifting approach to train mid-level cadres (clinical officers and nurses) to perform surgery and other lifesaving procedures. In the absence of a regulatory body that caters for their registration and accreditation, it will be difficult for them to operate in an environment devoid of parameters governing their roles and responsibilities and providing legal protection.

This regulatory vacuum is best resolved by establishing a Health Professions Authority to set the standards, and to supervise and regulate the medical and dental practitioners, pharmacists, public health practitioners, nurses and midwives, allied and other emerging health professions. The Health Professionals' Regulatory Authority Bill was developed after extensive consultations with stakeholders under the leadership of the Ministry of Health. It proposes to bring under one umbrella the regulation of all health professionals.

The Bill which was submitted to the Ministry of Health in July 2013 is currently awaiting enactment after all the necessary consultations. However the passage of the Medical Council Bill negates some of the key functions of the proposed Bill. Enactment of this Bill would streamline regulation and ease licensing and registration for health providers. Other merits of the Omnibus Health Professions Authority include:

- The Joint Health Professionals' Authority would streamline registration, licensing and accreditation. With a fragmented regulatory framework, health businesses face a very heavy burden of multiplicity of licenses - which increases the costs.
- The Joint Authority will have joint inspections.
- The Health Professionals Council proposed in the Bill would be a statutory body – with greater authority and a budget to implement regulation.
- The East African Community is moving towards a unified Health Professions Authority for all its member countries – South Sudan as an aspirant to join the community and would have a similar framework thus saving it from future amendments.

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