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Success Story

Do Nurses Need to Know How Long Medical Supplies Will Last?



USAID | DELIVER PROJECT 2009

Faculty in Ethiopia's southern region attend a training course about supply chain management, which they will teach to their students.

“Sophisticated concepts were taught in a very practical way.”

-Faculty member who took the course and later taught it to his students

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Nurses know all too well how important medical supplies are to their patients, so if nurses need to know how long their supplies will last, do they—and do pharmacists, doctors, and other health professionals—have the skills to calculate what medical supplies are needed and when?

In many places, formal training for health professionals is clinically oriented; often, everyone assumes that key medications, contraceptives, and other supplies will always be available. Stockouts, however, are common in many developing countries, and often professionals are not trained in supply chain basics, such as calculating how long their supplies will last. But, if the needed medication or medical supplies are not available, the health of their patients will suffer.

In recent years, Ethiopia has made impressive progress in supply chain management. Thousands of health professionals have been trained in logistics, enabling them to calculate how long their stocks will last, how much they need to order, and when they should order—the result has been improved care for their patients. But the staff trained are those already working in the field; as new nurses and pharmacists graduate and enter the system, they must wait to receive their training, if and when it is available.

To create more sustainable training, the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health collaborated with the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT to start a program of pre-service training in logistics, targeting young public health professionals while they were still in school. The program has enabled colleges to teach logistics to students in the health professions, including nurses, nurse midwives, pharmacists, and pharmacy technicians.

In June 2009, working with the Southern Regional Health Bureau and other partners, the project presented a five-day orientation in logistics to lecturers and managers at the four health science colleges in the southern region.

The orientation was a model of how the logistics concepts would be presented in the schools; reactions from the participants were very positive. During the orientation, a site visit to a clinic proved to be especially useful, as the participants could see a clinic from a logistics point of view for the first time. As one of them remarked, “The site visit helped me to see the practical aspect of the theory.” The visit was so helpful that the participants decided to include site visits in their courses. In the evaluation, one participant commented, “Sophisticated concepts were taught in a very practical way.” Another mentioned, “The inventory control system became understandable, because it was explained in a very practical way.”

After the orientation, each of the four colleges developed an implementation plan. Health science colleges in Ethiopia function with a high degree of autonomy, so each school created its own strategy to incorporate logistics into the curriculum. To support the colleges, the project provided a complete range of teaching materials for them to study and adapt. With an already full course schedule for health professionals, adding new content to their curriculum was not easy.

Different professions have very different schedules; in addition, many of the faculty lacked a technical background in supply chain management. Some were unfamiliar with the preferred method of interactive teaching, which has proven to have a strong impact in classes that include technical material.

Arbaminch Health Science College began its courses on March 22, 2010; Hossana Health Science Colleges started on April 26, 2010, with courses that included 16 to 20 contact hours. Both schools asked the project to provide reference materials for their school library.

Hawassa Health Science College has undergone institutional restructuring, which caused delays in their implementation plan; but the project continues to work with the new dean and trained lecturers, who are eager to move forward and begin teaching the course. Aman Health Science School could not immediately integrate the material into its already full curriculum. However, they decided that because the topic is so crucial, they will institute a special session for all graduating students in September 2010, to ensure that their graduates have logistics skills when they enter the work force. The faculty plans to phase in the logistics curriculum during the coming academic year.

The first professional school graduates with training in logistics will enter Ethiopia’s public health system in late 2010. With the skills to calculate how long their stock will last, how much they should order, when they should order, and how to control stockouts, these graduates will have an increasing impact on patient service, which, in turn, will improve the health of the Ethiopian people.

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