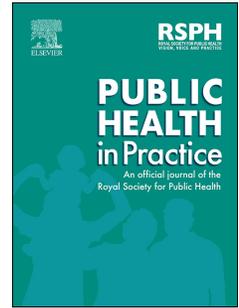


# Journal Pre-proof

Brain drain: An ever-present; significant challenge to the Zimbabwean public health sector

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Brain drain: An ever-present; significant challenge to the Zimbabwean public health sector

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1 **Brain drain: An ever-present, significant challenge to the Zimbabwean public health**  
2 **sector.**

3

4 **Abstract:**

5 The COVID-19 pandemic has seen developed countries relax migration procedures for health  
6 workers seeking new work opportunities elsewhere. Our letter outlines the risks of health  
7 workers outward migration to the HIV & TB program in Zimbabwe, a country with one of the  
8 worst morbidity and mortality by these two diseases in the world. We discuss the recent legal  
9 changes in immigration in the United Kingdom (UK) to facilitate easier movement of  
10 appropriate trained and experienced health professionals to relocate to that country. Additionally,  
11 we discuss key issues health workers in Zimbabwe face on a daily basis and why the UK is a  
12 natural fertile ground for their migration.

13 **Keywords:** Health care worker; Zimbabwe; Migration; COVID-19

14

15 **Dear Editor**

16 On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2020, in response to the impact of COVID-19 on the healthcare sector, the  
17 British Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care launched a Health and  
18 Care Visa to ensure UK health and care services have access to the best global talent. The new  
19 Health and Care Visa makes it cheaper, quicker and easier for healthcare professionals from  
20 around the world to come to the UK for work (1). This change in the visa regime is in response  
21 to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic unfolding in that country. This move by the UK  
22 government to address its own human resources for health needs couldn't have come at a more  
23 dire time especially for many English-speaking low-income countries such as Zimbabwe. While  
24 this move by the UK government will strengthen its own country health system, it will  
25 undoubtedly result in increase in outward migration of experienced and well-trained health  
26 workers looking for an opportunity for better working and living conditions. However, this letter  
27 is not meant to underplay the significant financial investment made over the past four decades by  
28 the British government to the public health sector in Zimbabwe.

29 The United Nations defines brain drain as a one-way movement of highly skilled people from  
30 developing to developed countries that only benefits the industrialized world. In Zimbabwe,  
31 brain drain has been put forward as a key contributor for the countries weak health system over  
32 the past two decades (2-5). High vacancy rates in the Zimbabwe government health services still  
33 persists. As of December 2019, 34% of doctors, 25% of radiographers, 64% of medical  
34 laboratory scientist positions were vacant (6) . With the relaxation of immigration process for  
35 health workers, we caution a substantial increase in migration of health workers from Zimbabwe  
36 to the UK further deteriorating the staffing situation.

37 Zimbabwe has seen health workers strike due to poor remuneration and work conditions  
38 compounded with a lack of personal protective equipment in the health facilities in the face of  
39 COVID-19 (7). A Zimbabwean doctor who is working in a government hospital in Zimbabwe is  
40 earning approximately US\$100 to US\$150 per month while a nurse earns around US\$50 to  
41 US\$75 dollars per month. Many frontline health workers in particular nurses have been infected  
42 with COVID-19 due to lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and poor infection control at  
43 facility level. Poor remuneration, coupled with inadequate consumables and medicines at  
44 facilities, is fertile ground for their migration. This is an important public health threat that  
45 requires urgent attention.

46 For instance, Zimbabwe has one of the largest HIV & TB burdens in the world with  
47 approximately 1.3 million of its citizens living with HIV. Nurses have played a key role in the  
48 HIV & TB response and have been on a national wide strike due to low salaries and substandard  
49 working conditions; we fear a massive outward migration to the UK is imminent. We call on the  
50 government of Zimbabwe to address health workers concerns to stem the outward migration tide  
51 and improve their livelihoods as these urgent measures are needed for the country to sustain  
52 gains achieved to date in its HIV & TB response (8, 9).

53 In conclusion, brain drain of health workers presents a serious threat to provision of healthcare  
54 and the achievement of the health-related Sustainable Development Goal in Zimbabwe. This  
55 pattern is experienced by many low- and middle-income countries. We call for the renewed  
56 focus on the role of brain on health service delivery in these countries and the need for  
57 innovative interventions to stem the trend. In the case of Zimbabwe, the upcoming Zimbabwe  
58 Human Resources for Health plan (2021 – 2025) must articulate effective strategies for

59 mitigation of brain drain effects and improved investment in the welfare and working conditions  
60 of health care workers in the country.

61

## 62 **Disclaimer**

63 This information presented in this letter are the views of the authors and do not reflect the  
64 position of their institutions.

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66 No funding was received for this work.

## 67 **Ethical Statement**

68 Our study did not require an ethical board approval because it did not contain human or animal  
69 trials

## 70 **Conflict of interest**

71 None to declare.

72

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