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International practices for admitting overseas-trained doctors to address workforce shortage: Implications for Hong Kong

*Yam CHK, Wong ELY, Liu S, Chung VCH, Yam LYC, Yeoh EK, Griffiths SM
JC School of Public Health and Primary Care, Faculty of Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

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Introduction

Some jurisdictions including the UK, US and Australia have long histories of shortages of healthcare professionals, leading to the importation of overseas-trained professionals through direct recruitment or a change of the immigration policies to address the workforce shortage. Hong Kong also has a shortage of healthcare professionals. To tackle the acute manpower shortage in public hospitals, the Hospital Authority has begun to recruit overseas-trained doctors to practice in Hong Kong under the Limited Registration application. However, there continues to be opposition from some local doctors unions on this measure as they express concern about the qualification and standards of the overseas-trained doctors.

Objectives

To review the international practices for admitting overseas-trained doctors and draw implications for Hong Kong.

Methodology

Desktop searches including a review of literature, policy papers and Ordinances, and information provided by the Government, regulatory bodies and relevant organisations on the internet.

Result

There are different criteria for employing overseas-trained doctors worldwide. In general, criteria include a mix of linguistic requirements, medical internship and licensing examinations. Some jurisdictions such as Singapore, Malaysia and Australia do not require qualifying/ licensing examinations or internships if the overseas-trained doctors are trained from a recognized list of qualified overseas institutions. Singapore has a list of 155 institutions in 28 jurisdictions where Malaysia has 374 institutions in 34 jurisdictions. The overseas-trained doctors will still need some form of professional

assessment such as supervised training for a period of time. Assessment of standards may be achieved by the professions working with the regulators, as in the UK where the Academy/ Medical Royal Colleges play a role in assessing the postgraduate qualifications of overseas graduates and making recommendations to the General Medical Council. In Hong Kong the system for admitting overseas-trained doctors is relatively inflexible since it requires both a pass in the licensing examination and an additional one-year medical internship. Since 1997 there are low numbers of doctors trained outside Hong Kong admitted to the medical register despite shortages in several specialties. This raises the concern of a need for a more effective mechanism for recruiting overseas-trained doctors without sacrificing the quality of the care. *The study is funded by the Food and Health Bureau, HKSAR.