

Strengthening of Health Professions

Strengthening of Midwifery and Other Health Professions

Health profession strengthening can lead to the improved health of a population in a myriad of ways. Empiric evidence shows that, among other things, a strong regulatory system which supports professionalized health care cadres is required to ensure a fully functioning health care system. It supports the development of well trained clinicians with standardized and updated skills who can competently serve their communities. Standardization through a working regulatory system reinforces a sense of professional identity and pride which in turn leads to increased engagement with local and national policy making; increased commitment to the profession and to patients; and an improved pool of candidates. Professional associations are another powerful tool to strengthen health professions and often act as important change agents. Practitioners are often the first to recognize the need for regulatory systems. They are also the best positioned to understand current limitations in patient care as well as the potential of their profession to impact the health of their country. Associations can be a mechanism for implementing regulatory systems, providing continuing education, lobbying for the resources needed to create enabling environments, and positioning maternal and child health as priorities on the national agenda.

Regulatory Systems

The primary role of a regulatory system is to safeguard public health. Various structures work together to maintain quality of care and ensure patient safety. These structures include codes of ethics, scopes of practice, certification, licensing, and accreditation.

Developing a code of ethics and scope of practice (SOP) with corresponding core competencies helps to define the



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profession and set expectations for provision of care and appropriate behavior. They serve dual roles in protecting both the public and the health professionals when their practice is questioned or challenged. Scopes of practice should be expected to change over time in relation to changing priorities, human resource realities, and educational preparation, and should be written in a way that allows such change. In-service training systems designed by ACNM have stimulated expansion of SOP for midwives through proving their ability to acquire life saving skills such as manual removal of placentas, use of Magnesium Sulphate to manage pre-eclampsia, and vacuum extraction.

School accreditation systems standardize pre-service education and provide a guarantee to both the public and prospective

students that students will have obtained the core competencies of their profession by graduation. When school standards are upheld and enforced across both public and private institutions, diplomas and degrees become a meaningful reflection of the ability to proffer life saving care. In the race to increase skilled attendance at birth, efforts to respond to the unmet need for service providers must be careful not to sacrifice quality for quantity lest the training burden be merely delayed and shifted to less efficient in-service mechanisms.

The aim of both certification and licensing is to ensure that only those individuals who have completed the required educational criteria and who meet core professional competencies are able to call themselves midwives (or the title of any other health

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Improving the health and well-being of women and infants worldwide through strengthening the profession of midwifery.

cadre) and work in such a capacity. Initial certification generally happens immediately following graduation from basic training and requires applicants to successfully complete a national standardized test. Certification systems ideally include a mechanism for re-certification. The need for clinicians to regularly re-certify ensures a workforce that receives clinical updates and continues to maintain clinical competencies.

A working regulatory system ultimately results in greater sustainability and efficiency of the entire health system. ACNM is in a unique position to understand the full implications of various regulatory components as it possesses decades-long domestic experience strengthening the profession of midwifery in the United States. ACNM brings first-hand experience in understanding how regulations evolve over time, what type of agencies are best suited to design and oversee each regulatory component, what data needs are, and where checks and balances should be. Unlike other entities, ACNM can offer peer-to-peer support and mentoring in developing, refining, and managing regulatory components and can share its own evolution from being responsible for certification and school accreditation to spinning off those responsibilities to independent organizations.

Association Strengthening

Professional associations have the potential to play numerous roles within health profession strengthening. Depending on the context they may primarily act as advocates, pushing for improved education, remuneration, and working conditions, or they may act as implementers designing and implementing continuing education systems or regulatory structures. Associations in many parts of the world are currently at a point in their development where they are capable of building continuing education, certification, and re-certification systems. As with regulatory strengthening, ACNM provides peer-to-peer support.

ACNM has assisted with the organizational development of midwifery associations in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Activities have varied depending on the needs of each association and their level of development. For example, when ACNM began work in Indonesia, the association already had more than 70,000 members.



Work focused on developing a self-funded continuing education system including peer-to-peer supportive supervision. In Afghanistan the association was just beginning to form; work focused more on basic management skills and structures. Commonly addressed issues include writing by-laws, developing personnel and financial handbooks, recruiting members and developing member databases, creating funding streams, managing internal communication mechanisms such as newsletters or regional meetings, and liaising with external organizations such as the MOH and other health development partners. ACNM's work with associations also often focuses on building the capacity of their membership to participate in policy and standards setting and to serve as in-country resources promoting quality of care and integrated services.

Overview of ACNM's Global Expertise

As the professional organization of certified nurse-midwives and certified midwives in the U.S., ACNM and its Department of Global Outreach are uniquely positioned to lead efforts in strengthening the profession of midwives and other health care workers around the world. Over the past three decades through working in more than 30 countries, DGO has developed invaluable institutional knowledge of the components required to build a profession that creates competent and qualified providers. By calling on the programmatic and technical expertise of its staff and membership, ACNM can provide support for the full range of clinical maternal and newborn health topics.

The following are areas of expertise:

- Development and implementation of in-service training systems
- Integrated pre-service strengthening
- Strengthening of midwifery and other health professions
- Community education and mobilization

ACNM emphasizes partnership and capacity building with both individuals and organizations and incorporates flexibility and creativity with evidence-based best practices. A systems approach which improves accountability is employed to support quality of care. Leadership from ACNM staff is initially provided while simultaneously strengthening the locus of control and ownership of projects within countries.

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