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EDITORIAL BRAIN DRAIN

## Crisis of Brain Drain in Nigeria's Health Sector: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path Forward

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### ABSTRACT

Brain drain represents an existential threat to the health ecosystem in Nigeria as an increasing number of health professionals migrate to developed and industrialized nations where they are guaranteed higher salaries, better job security, and a more conducive work environment. As of 2023, the United Kingdom remains the leading destination, with over 12,000 Nigerian doctors, while the United States, Canada, and Germany follow closely. While these migrations provide individual doctors with career advancement and financial security, they leave behind a healthcare system teetering on the edge. The shortage of healthcare professionals is already having profound effects on Nigeria's health indices, including a staggering burden of maternal-infant morbidity and mortality. The solution to this medical "tsunami" consists of improving the welfare of healthcare workers, creating more job opportunities, and investing in modern healthcare infrastructure. Ultimately, sound political and visionary leadership is required for any lasting solution to the current healthcare brain drain, which threatens health security in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Brain Drain, Health Professionals, Infant Mortality, Maternal Mortality, Medical Tourism

### INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian health ecosystem faces an existential threat that strikes at the foundation of its capacity to deliver quality healthcare: Brain drain. The continuous migration of health personnel in search of better living standards, higher salaries, and access to advanced technology has depleted Nigeria's medical workforce to a critical level. If left unchecked, this exodus threatens not only the health of Nigeria's citizens but also its overall socioeconomic fabric. According to the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, the country had only 74,543 registered doctors for a population of about 218 million in 2022 – a doctor-patient ratio of 1:3,500, which falls alarmingly short of the World Health Organization's recommended 1:600.<sup>[1]</sup> Such numbers are not just statistics; they are a reflection of a healthcare system on the brink of collapse.

### FUNDAMENTAL CAUSES OF BRAIN DRAIN

The causes of brain drain in Nigeria are multifaceted and deeply rooted. Foremost among these is the inadequate welfare of healthcare professionals. With higher salaries, better job security,

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and a more conducive work environment abroad, Nigerian doctors are naturally drawn to developed nations where their skills are valued and compensated appropriately. Over 20,000 Nigerian doctors are currently practicing in the United States, with many more spread across countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany.

Table 1 highlights the top four developed countries attracting the most Nigerian doctors. As of 2023, the United Kingdom remains the leading destination, with over 12,000 Nigerian doctors, while the United States, Canada, and Germany follow closely. The disparity in annual income between these countries and Nigeria underscores why healthcare professionals are leaving in droves.

In addition to poor compensation, unemployment within Nigeria's healthcare sector further exacerbates the problem. Young medical graduates often struggle to find stable jobs, pushing them to seek opportunities abroad. Moreover, the systemic failure in leadership and governance plays a significant role. With corruption and inefficiency prevalent in the Nigerian government, healthcare workers lose faith in any promises of reform or improvement. The lack of leadership has also allowed insecurity to grow, another factor driving healthcare professionals away. Many Nigerian health workers face not only professional risks but also personal safety concerns due to rising kidnappings, assaults, and the ongoing terrorism that plagues the country. Perhaps, the most frustrating aspect for Nigerian health professionals is the state of the healthcare infrastructure. Antiquated equipment, a lack of basic medical supplies, and poorly maintained facilities make their work not only difficult but also disheartening. These conditions create a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction, leading to migration at the slightest opportunity.

**WORSENING HEALTH INDICES: A GRIM REALITY**

While these migrations provide individual doctors with career advancement and financial security, they leave behind a healthcare system teetering on the edge. The shortage of healthcare professionals is already having profound effects on Nigeria's health indices, especially on maternal and infant mortality. The current statistics place Nigeria as the highest

contributor of maternal deaths globally, with an estimated 82,000 deaths in 2020, which is over a quarter (28.5%) of all maternal deaths worldwide.<sup>[2]</sup> The situation for infant mortality is equally dire, standing at 72 deaths/1,000 live births. These alarming figures will only worsen if the mass exodus of health workers continues unchecked. Consider a scenario where a pregnant woman in a rural community requires emergency care due to complications. With an overwhelming shortage of doctors and nurses, she may face long delays or be forced to travel hours to reach the nearest hospital, only to find overworked, under-equipped staff. Such delays significantly increase the risk of maternal death. Similarly, infants born prematurely or with complications often lack access to critical care, and the shortage of specialized pediatricians makes it more likely that these children will not survive.

The human cost of brain drain extends far beyond mortality statistics. Nigeria's potential to reduce preventable deaths, achieve universal health coverage, and improve life expectancy is being systematically eroded by this mass exodus. The depletion of skilled professionals means that patients are more likely to experience misdiagnoses, inadequate care, or prolonged suffering.

**THE FINANCIAL STRAIN OF MEDICAL TOURISM**

For those Nigerians who can afford it, medical tourism has become an alternative – fleeing the country to seek treatment abroad. In 2022 alone, Nigerians spent over \$1 billion on medical tourism. This trend, however, further impoverishes families. The out-of-pocket spending on overseas medical care drains household incomes, while many private healthcare settings in Nigeria, developed as a response to the failing public health system, often provide substandard care. These private clinics charge exorbitant fees but frequently lack the facilities, technology, and skilled personnel needed to provide quality care. The implications are staggering. Nigeria's middle class, already squeezed by economic challenges, is being driven deeper into poverty due to these medical expenses. Families frequently find themselves choosing between inadequate local treatment and plunging into debt for overseas care. For many, healthcare has become a financial burden rather than a public good.

**THE CRISIS FOR THE POOR: LIVING BY CHANCE**

For the vast majority of Nigerians who cannot afford medical tourism or private healthcare, the options are bleak. The collapse of the public healthcare system has left them with little choice but to rely on luck or accept death as a likely outcome in the face of severe illness. Many must simply live by chance, hoping they do not fall seriously ill as medical

**Table 1:** Countries attracting the most Nigerian doctors.

Country	Number of Nigerian doctors	Year	Average annual income
United Kingdom	12,198	2023	\$138,000
United States	4,000	2020	\$316,000
Canada	932	2020	\$194,000
Germany	133	2020	\$183,000

Data adapted from Dataphyte research

services grow increasingly out of reach. This tragic reality underscores the urgent need for intervention. People in low-income communities face daily hardships, often resigning themselves to traditional remedies or ineffective treatments in the absence of professional healthcare. Many lives are lost to diseases that could have been easily prevented or treated if Nigeria had a functioning healthcare system. The burden of disease, poverty, and desperation is intertwined, making the health crisis an urgent humanitarian issue.

## THE PATH FORWARD: A CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

The consequences of this brain drain go beyond just healthcare statistics – they strike at the heart of Nigeria's future. If the Nigerian government does not take immediate action to retain its healthcare professionals, the ramifications will be severe, affecting the economy, education, and the overall well-being of the population. For already ailing healthcare sectors such as the maternal and child health population, the consequences are unimaginable.

Improving the welfare of healthcare workers, creating more job opportunities, and investing in modern healthcare infrastructure are immediate steps that must be taken. Beyond material investment, Nigeria needs visionary leadership – leadership that understands the critical role of healthcare in national development and is committed to providing the resources and policies necessary to support it.

Nigeria must also engage in bilateral agreements with countries that have become destinations for its healthcare workers. These agreements could facilitate knowledge transfer, skill exchange programs, and, potentially, mechanisms for healthcare workers to contribute to their home country while working abroad.

As the global demand for skilled healthcare workers continues to rise, the pressure on Nigeria will only increase. The time to act is now. Retaining our doctors is not just a matter of healthcare – it is a matter of national survival. Without urgent reforms, the health of Nigeria's population and the nation's socioeconomic progress will continue to decline.

## CONCLUSION AND GLOBAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The solution is clear: Improve working conditions, invest in infrastructure, and foster an environment that values and supports healthcare professionals. Only then can Nigeria

hope to reverse the devastating brain drain that threatens the very survival of its health system and its people. As Africa's most populous country, the entire continent looks up to Nigeria to learn how they are able to mitigate the crisis of health professionals' brain drain.

### Key Messages

1) The mass migration of Nigerian healthcare professionals to wealthier countries is creating a dangerous vacuum, severely weakening the local healthcare delivery system and worsening critical health indicators such as maternal and infant mortality. 2) Nigerian doctors are leaving in search of better salaries, job security, and supportive work environments—needs that are unmet in the current system. This highlights systemic failures in healthcare investment and workforce management. 3) Combating brain drain requires comprehensive action: improving healthcare worker welfare, expanding employment opportunities, modernizing infrastructure, and—most crucially—committed, visionary leadership to drive long-term solutions.

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