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Do financial incentives work in attracting health workers to rural areas? Evidence from four less-developed provinces in western China

Background: Rural areas, especially in relatively less developed western rural China, are still plagued by the problem of much lower health service capacity due to shortage of qualified health professionals. Therefore, how to attract and retain qualified health workers in rural under-served areas in China, is a critical issue to be addressed with more research evidence and policy changes.

Methods: Based on incentive theories, satisfaction and behavioral theory, this study conducted investigations on random sampled 828 health workers (represent stock) and 300 medical senior students (represent future supply) in four rural provinces of western China to figure out their job willingness and consideration. Qualitative methods included literature review, individual interview and group interview. Descriptive quantitative methods were used to identify differences of incentives among medical facilities. Pearson's correlation analysis was introduced to identify incentive factors. Besides, principal component analysis and factor analysis was applied in further classification and analyzing of 29 indicators of incentives.

Results: 1. Severely shortage of human resources is common in each facility, especially in county hospital. 2. Differences of health workers' job satisfaction among facilities and cadres, titles, education degree are statistically significant. 3. Work reward, work load, training and career developing opportunity and respect of community are essential factors that health workers mostly concern which need to be considered and improved as soon as possible. 4. Rural original medical students are more likely to remain to practice in remote areas. 5. Equal work reward as urban areas, work stability, and more chances to gain promotion and training are prerequisites for students to work in rural areas.

Conclusions: Both financial and non-financial incentives work in attracting health workers to rural areas. But financial incentives alone are insufficient in recruitment and retention, multifaceted strategies might work better.