

World Health Assembly Executive Board 136: YP-CDN, NWIA and HAI intervention on the WHO's internship programme

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✘ At the 136th World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board meeting in Geneva this past week, we had the privilege of developing an intervention with the Young Professionals Chronic Disease Network (YP-CDN) and the Network of WHO Intern Alumni (NWIA) regarding the WHO's internships programme. Unfortunately, the WHO wouldn't allow the intervention to be read because internships are considered a 'management' issue. Despite this, because it's an excellent intervention and full of good ideas, we've decided to post it anyway.

Chair and esteemed delegates:

I am speaking on behalf of Stichting Health Action International, the Network of WHO Intern Alumni (NWIA) and the Young Professionals Chronic Disease Network (YP-CDN). I am also speaking as one of thousands of former WHO interns, to raise an issue of great importance to global human resources for health: internships at WHO headquarters.

Each year, over 500 interns work without pay at WHO-HQ, comprising 16 per cent of total personnel. Their contribution is vital to WHO's work and without them, the WHO workplan could not be completed. Many former interns return as WHO staff, or assume important national or international roles in policy-making. One example is former intern, Dr. Bruce Aylward, ADG and coordinator of the WHO Ebola response.

Yet, only 20 per cent of WHO-HQ interns come from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with many member states not represented at all. The shortage of LMIC interns at WHO-HQ is a missed opportunity to develop human resources for health in both WHO and LMIC Member States.

Two main factors that restrict internship accessibility and drive disproportionate representation are the unpaid, voluntary status of WHO internships and a selection process without institutional oversight that demonstrably fails to deliver geographic diversity.

We therefore urge Member States to:

Firstly, request a report on WHO-HQ intern representation for 2013-2015 for review at the 2016 Executive Board meeting and annual reporting thereafter.

Secondly, we request the creation of a dedicated WHO Internship Programme Director, tasked with promoting equity and balancing Member State representation through a centralized intern selection process. We have the network and expertise to support WHO to select interns with a diverse geographical representation.

Lastly, we request that a report be issued by the next Executive Board Meeting on the cost and feasibility of supporting LMIC interns through stipends at WHO-HQ as offered by some other UN agencies.

Member States, how many of your future generation of health policy experts have had the benefit of internships at the WHO? The answer, if you are from an LMIC, is very few.

Jordan Jarvis,
YP-CDN and NWIA