
Workforce Shortages in Three Health Professions: Physiotherapy, Speech- Language Pathology, and Occupational Therapy

An International Comparison

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Abstract

Background

Workforce planning is central to the healthcare system's operations. Shortages of professionals, reflected in delays in care or lack of access to treatment, may lead to worsening medical conditions and increase costs for both the system and the Israeli economy.

Israel's healthcare system is experiencing workforce shortages in three professions: physiotherapy, speech-language pathology (SLP), and occupational therapy. Demand for these health services is growing with the increase in the populations requiring rehabilitation and supportive care in communication, mobility, and functioning. These shortages reduce service availability and undermine the system's ability to respond to these populations. Children, people injured in accidents or in combat or hostilities, older adults, and people with disabilities all have difficulty obtaining appropriate care.

In 2021, the Prime Minister's Office published a report on workforce shortages in these three health professions. Following the report, Government Resolution No. 1140 was adopted in February 2022 to provide a comprehensive response to these gaps in public service. However, the situation may worsen still given the workforce shortage in the Ministry of Defense Rehabilitation Department, which serves many of those injured in the Israel-Hamas war.

The Ministry of Health commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to review workforce planning mechanisms in a range of countries, with particular attention to the regulator's role in assessing demand for services, planning the current and future workforce, and addressing shortages.

Objective

This study provides decision makers with a knowledge base on recommended workforce planning strategies in physiotherapy, SLP, and occupational therapy, and on optimal solutions for improving service supply and availability in Israel.

The findings will enable the Ministry of Health to:

1. Review existing models used by regulators to assess workforce shortages in health professions
2. Study measures taken internationally for immediate and long-term workforce planning
3. Identify the range of strategies used by regulators to address workforce gaps
4. Identify barriers and challenges as well as successful experiences in implementing various strategies, based on experience gained in other countries, and assess their suitability for the Israeli system

Methods

1. A review of both academic and grey literature was conducted between November 2024 and January 2026. It was based on research articles and publications from professional and official databases in the selected countries, as well as from professional associations and health services. Eleven countries were reviewed: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
2. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 experts in the selected countries with research or practical experience in at least one of the three professions.
3. Comparative analysis of the review findings and thematic analysis of the interviews.

Findings

The main indicators used to assess workforce shortage are workforce surveys, waiting times, unemployment and vacancy rates, workforce-to-population ratios, and the issuance and renewal of professional licenses. Regulators most often use vacancy assessment as the main indicator and apply models based on historical trends to assess supply and demand. Regulators differ in how they assess supply and demand.

Recruitment and retention challenges include low wages, burnout, limited opportunities for advancement, work in peripheral areas, lack of training programs, and limited awareness and lack of recognition of the professions under study. Various approaches have been developed to address these challenges, including recruitment and retention strategies and programs to build data and research infrastructure.

Workforce shortages are evident in most countries, as is the difficulty assessing their extent. Recent initiatives by the Australian government and World Physiotherapy – the profession's international organization – have focused on building data infrastructure and research to support the assessment and addressing of workforce shortages.

Key Recommendations

1

Establish a national team of experts to support robust assessment of the workforce situation in the health professions (for example, current and future shortages) – including researchers, government representatives, and representatives of the health professions – to develop a national workforce database and models for assessing shortages.

2

Strengthen collaboration between the Ministry of Health and professional associations to examine in depth the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining workers in the health professions.

3

Develop national strategies for addressing workforce shortages in the health professions. This review provides the required knowledge base.
