

# Rural or urban?

## The role of nurses' dedication towards patients in their choice of job



POLICY BRIEF 1 | Health workforce research theme

June 2014

### Key points

- An important first step in addressing human resource shortages in health systems is knowing what factors influence health workers' job and location choices, as this information can lead to more effective human resource planning and management.
- RESYST researchers have been seeking to address this issue in South Africa where there remains a severe and persistent shortage of qualified nurses in rural areas, despite on-going efforts to attract health workers.
- Evidence suggests that nurses who are exposed to rural life, either through training or as part of their upbringing, are more likely to work in rural posts.
- However, new research has found that decisions about job location are also affected by a characteristic intrinsic to each individual – the dedication of nurses towards their patients. The more dedicated nurses are, as measured by their generosity towards patients in an economic behavioural experiment, the more likely they are to choose a rural job.
- To ensure that a higher proportion of nurses choose rural posts, the recruitment processes of nursing students could try and ascertain the extent to which potential candidates show signs of dedication towards patients. Also, nurses' curricula and experience during their studies could be adapted to cultivate positive attitudes towards patients.

### Background

In South Africa RESYST researchers have sought to address the challenges of attracting and retaining health workers in rural areas, by tracking a cohort of nursing graduates and monitoring their employment decisions over several years.

Using data gathered, researchers investigated whether pro-social preferences (actions that intend to benefit others) played a role in nurses' decisions to work in rural areas three years after graduation.

Specifically, the analysis focused on whether or not nurses' dedication towards their patients, as measured by their generosity in an economic experiment, was a factor in their choice of job location.

#### Measuring generosity towards patients

To develop a measure of nurses' professional dedication, graduates took part in an economic behavioural experiment at the beginning of the

research. Participants in the experiment were given an endowment to split between themselves and someone else, and the proportion of money given to the recipient was interpreted as a measure of generosity.

In this version, nurses were asked three times to divide 100 Rand (approximately £6.60) between themselves and a recipient: the first time, the recipient was a *patient*; the second time, the recipient was another nursing *student*; and final time, the recipient was a *poor person* (see figure 1).

#### Comparing dedication with nurses' actual job location

Researchers examined the association between the measure of nurses' professional dedication and whether the nurse was working in a rural health facility three years later using data collected from the cohort. At this time 343 nurses were working in either a hospital or a health centre/clinic.

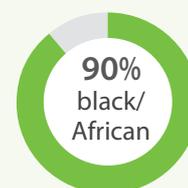
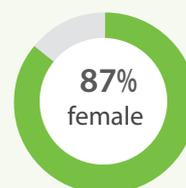
### About the nursing graduates

343

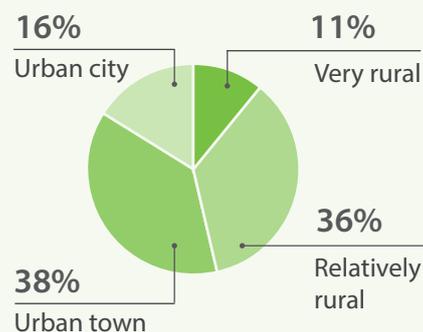
nurse graduates  
in the study

34

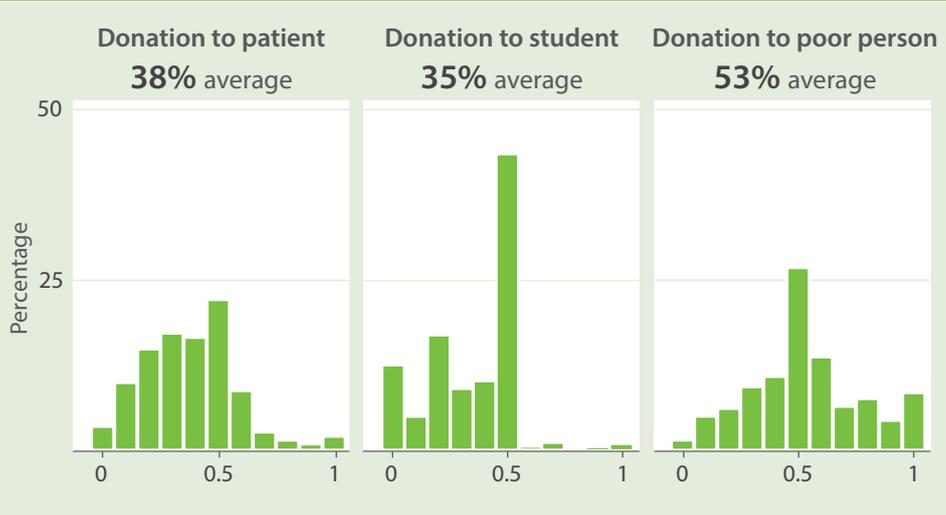
years  
(average age)



#### ● Place of birth



**Figure 1** Proportion of money donated in the economic experiments



**Findings**

Nurses with higher levels of dedication towards patients are more likely to choose a rural job

The research found that an increase in the donation made to patients in the economic experiment by 10% translated to an increase in the probability of choosing a job in a rural area by between 2.3-2.7%.

The result was particularly strong when rural jobs were in health centres - where nurses' roles are likely to be more important than in a bigger, better-staffed facility.

Extreme dedication towards patients, where participants donated half or more of their endowment, is associated with an increase in the probability of choosing a rural job by 17%.

There is no evidence that greater generosity towards peers is predictive of a choice of rural jobs. This gives additional support to the idea that it is a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of patients, rather than generosity in general that shapes nurses' decisions.

Other factors affecting the choice of a rural job

Having trained in a more rural province increases the probability of being in

a rural job by 45%. Of all the variables tested in the research, training location had the most important effect on nurses' job location.

Being born in a rural area increases the probability to take up a rural job by 28%.

Being black/African and being older also increases the probability of working in rural areas.

**Policy implications**

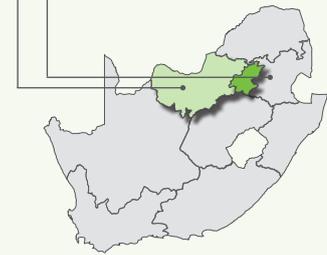
The findings are meaningful for human resource policy in South Africa especially with regards to the selection and training of student nurses.

To ensure that a higher proportion of nurses are willing to choose rural posts, the recruitment processes of nursing students could try to ascertain the extent to which potential candidates show signs of dedication towards patients, or a commitment to improving patients' wellbeing.

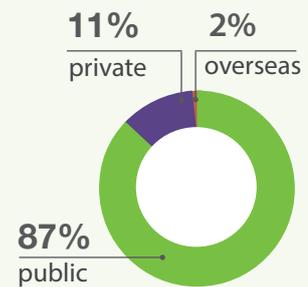
Alternatively, assuming that professional dedication can be nurtured, health workers' curricular and experience during their studies could be adapted to cultivate positive attitudes towards patients.

**Location of training**

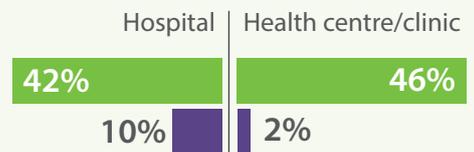
43% rural North-West province  
57% urban Gauteng province



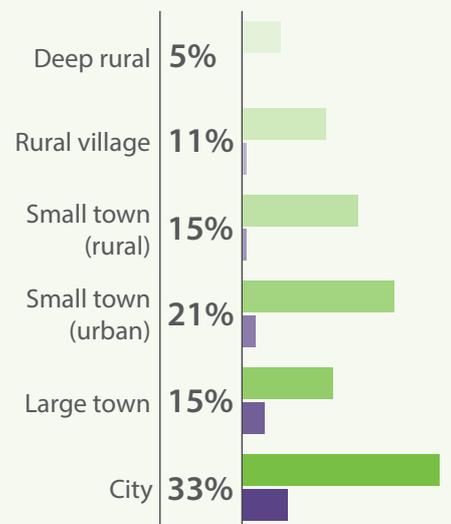
**Job sector**



**Type of health facility**



**Location of health facility**



**About the brief**

This policy brief is based on RESYST Working Paper 3: **Pro-social preferences and self-selection into rural jobs: evidence from South African nurses** written by Mylene Lagarde and Duane Blaauw

<http://resyst.lshtm.ac.uk>



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