Power System Technology
ISSN:1000-3673

Received: 16-08-2025 Revised: 05-09-2025 Accepted: 23-10-2025

Building Professional Capacity of the Healthcare Workforce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities

1Talal Mulhi Sameer Alharbi, 2Fahaid Ayed Fahaid Alshammari, 3Mushabbab Ali Mushabbab Alqahtani, 4Ola Ahmed Taher Allaab, 5Ghadah Jaafar Al Ibrahim, 6Tawfeq Abdulkarem Aqeel, 7Ahmed Ibrahem Alsehli, 8Awad Aziz Almutairi, 9Areej Almutairi, 10Mohammed Helal Zaal Alanazi

1Social Worker, Ministry Of National Guard Health Affairs
2Emergency Medical Services, National Guard Health Affairs
3Emergency Medical Services Specialist, Crisis And Health Disaster Center Riyadh
4Nursing Technician, Dhahran Long Tarm Care Hospitals
5Nursing Technician, Maternity And Children's Hospital In Dammam
6Health Information Technician, King Abdulaziz Medical City In Jeddah
7Health Information Technician, King Abdulaziz Medical City In Jeddah
8Health Information Technician, King Abdulaziz Medical City In Jeddah
9Anesthesia Technologist, National Guard Hospital
10Specialist-Health Administration, Aljouf Health Cluster

Abstract

Professional capacity building is a cornerstone of safe, high-quality, and resilient healthcare systems. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), healthcare delivery is undergoing rapid modernization shaped by demographic growth, epidemiological transition toward chronic diseases, and ambitious reforms aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. These shifts increase the demand for a workforce that is clinically competent, digitally enabled, leadership-ready, and continuously learning. This paper examines professional capacity building for the healthcare workforce in Saudi Arabia by synthesizing key challenges and identifying high-impact opportunities. Challenges include workforce shortages and uneven regional distribution, variability in training quality and clinical exposure, limited protected time and institutional incentives for continuous professional development (CPD), leadership and management competency gaps, rapid digital transformation that outpaces workforce readiness, and constraints related to interprofessional collaboration, research capacity, and staff wellbeing. Opportunities arise from national transformation programs, expansion of health sciences education and simulation-based training, stronger regulation and competency frameworks through the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties, accelerating digital health initiatives, international partnerships, and increasing emphasis on quality, safety, and value-based care. The paper proposes actionable strategies for hospitals and policymakers, including competency-based pathways, structured mentorship, leadership development, protected learning time, workforce planning driven by data, and evaluation systems that link CPD to patient outcomes.

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Keywords: healthcare workforce, professional capacity building, Saudi Arabia, continuous professional development, leadership, Vision 2030

Introduction

Health systems depend on the competence, motivation, and adaptability of their healthcare workforce. Professional capacity building refers to systematic efforts that strengthen the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and leadership capabilities of healthcare workers and the organizations in which they practice. Capacity building is not limited to training events; it includes structured education, competency assessment, supportive supervision, mentorship, quality improvement capability, digital literacy, and career pathways that encourage lifelong learning.

Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in healthcare infrastructure over recent decades and continues to reform service models to meet evolving population needs. Like many countries, the Kingdom faces increasing prevalence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other chronic conditions, alongside persistent risks from infectious diseases and emerging public health threats. Hospitals also operate under pressure to deliver safer care, reduce preventable harm, and meet accreditation requirements. These realities require a workforce that can apply evidence-based practice, communicate effectively with patients and teams, and adopt new technologies while maintaining ethical and culturally sensitive care.

Under Saudi Vision 2030, human capital development is a national priority. The Health Sector Transformation Program aims to improve access, quality, efficiency, and preventive care, and these goals depend on workforce readiness. This paper analyzes the major challenges that influence professional capacity building in Saudi hospitals and identifies opportunities to accelerate workforce development. It also offers a pragmatic framework for hospitals and policymakers to design, implement, and evaluate workforce capacity building programs linked to measurable outcomes.

Conceptual Framework: What "Professional Capacity" Means in Healthcare

Professional capacity in healthcare can be understood across four interconnected dimensions: (1) clinical competence, (2) professional behaviors and teamwork, (3) leadership and management capability, and (4) system readiness for innovation and improvement.

Clinical competence includes discipline-specific knowledge and technical skills, adherence to guidelines, safe medication practices, infection prevention, diagnostic reasoning, and procedural competence. Professional behaviors include ethics, patient-centered communication, cultural competence, and accountability for safety. Teamwork competence includes interprofessional collaboration, handover quality, and shared decision-making.

Leadership capacity extends beyond formal managerial roles. It includes the ability to influence change, manage conflict, coach others, use data for improvement, and sustain reliable clinical processes. System readiness refers to the organizational conditions that

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enable learning and performance, such as staffing, learning infrastructure, simulation labs, protected time for CPD, access to evidence resources, digital tools, and supportive governance.

Capacity building interventions are most effective when they are competency-based, embedded within workflow, reinforced by feedback, and supported by leadership. Hospitals that treat training as a one-time activity often struggle to sustain change. In contrast, learning health systems integrate education, quality improvement, and data feedback loops so that workforce capability steadily improves while patient outcomes are monitored.

Healthcare Workforce Landscape in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's healthcare workforce includes physicians, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory professionals, radiology and imaging staff, respiratory therapists, physiotherapists, emergency medical professionals, and a wide range of allied health and administrative roles. Healthcare is delivered through the Ministry of Health (MOH) network, other governmental providers, and an expanding private sector. This multiplicity of providers creates both opportunities (e.g., innovation and competition) and challenges (e.g., uneven standards and variable access to training).

A commonly reported issue is uneven distribution of staff across regions, with higher concentration of specialized personnel in major urban centers. Rural and remote areas may face shortages and higher turnover, which affects continuity of care and the ability to sustain training programs. Another ongoing feature is reliance on expatriate clinicians in many roles. While expatriate staff contribute substantially to service delivery and clinical expertise, high turnover and variable alignment with long-term national workforce goals can complicate capacity building efforts and create repeated onboarding burdens.

To strengthen national capacity, Saudi Arabia has expanded medical and health sciences education, introduced scholarship pathways, invested in residency and fellowship programs, and promoted workforce nationalization initiatives. However, aligning graduate supply, specialty mix, and competency outcomes with actual service needs remains a complex task that requires continuous workforce planning and strong coordination between education, regulators, and healthcare providers.

Key Challenges in Building Professional Capacity

1) Workforce shortages and workload pressure. Staffing gaps in certain professions and specialties can raise workload intensity, reduce supervision quality, and leave limited protected time for learning. Under high workload, healthcare workers may prioritize immediate clinical tasks over CPD activities, leading to a cycle where performance improvement is delayed.

2) Variability in training quality and clinical exposure. Differences across institutions in faculty capacity, clinical case mix, simulation access, and assessment methods can produce

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inconsistent competency levels among graduates and early-career practitioners. This variability complicates standardization and can create inequities in career progression.

3) Limited protected time and weak incentives for CPD. Although CPD requirements may exist, participation can become a compliance exercise if workers lack time, funding, or institutional recognition. In some settings, attendance at training is not linked to clear competency advancement or career progression, reducing motivation.

4) Leadership and management competency gaps. Many clinicians assume supervisory or managerial roles without structured preparation in leadership, finance, operations, workforce management, or quality and safety. This can weaken the capacity of departments to implement training plans, manage change, and sustain improvement.

5) Rapid digital transformation and uneven digital readiness. Hospitals are adopting electronic health records, data dashboards, telehealth, and automation. Without structured digital literacy training and support, technology can increase cognitive burden and contribute to workarounds that threaten safety.

6) Interprofessional collaboration barriers. Effective care increasingly requires collaboration across professions, but traditional hierarchies, unclear role boundaries, and insufficient teamwork training can limit collaboration and hinder patient flow. Communication failures during handovers remain a recognized patient safety risk.

7) Research and evidence-use capacity constraints. Evidence-based practice requires skills in literature appraisal, data interpretation, and participation in quality improvement or research. Limited access to research mentorship, protected time, or training in implementation science can slow the uptake of best practices.

8) Staff wellbeing, burnout, and retention issues. Capacity building is difficult in settings with high turnover, burnout, or low psychological safety. When staff are exhausted or perceive that learning is not supported, training has less impact. Sustainable capacity building therefore requires attention to workload design, wellbeing supports, and a culture that enables speaking up about safety issues.

Opportunities for Professional Capacity Building in Saudi Arabia

1) Vision 2030 and the Health Sector Transformation Program. National reform provides a policy mandate and investment momentum for workforce development. When workforce strategies are explicitly tied to transformation goals (quality, access, prevention, and value), capacity building becomes a core performance priority rather than an optional activity.

2) Expansion of health sciences education and postgraduate training. Saudi Arabia has expanded universities, residency programs, and specialty training pathways. Enhancing curriculum alignment with competency frameworks and strengthening clinical mentorship can accelerate readiness of graduates for practice.

3) Stronger regulation and competency frameworks. The Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS) has an important role in licensing, specialty training, professional

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standards, and CPD requirements. Competency-based assessments and structured re-licensure pathways can reinforce continuous learning, especially when linked to meaningful competency milestones.

4) Simulation-based education and skills labs. Simulation enables safe practice of critical skills (e.g., resuscitation, infection prevention, medication safety, crisis resource management) and supports standardized assessment. Expanding simulation access across regions and professions offers scalable benefits.

5) Digital health as a capacity-building accelerator. E-learning platforms, microlearning, tele-mentoring, virtual case conferences, and digital competency tracking can reduce geographic barriers and allow flexible learning. Data dashboards can also support feedback on clinical performance and guideline adherence.

6) International partnerships and benchmarking. Collaborations with global academic centers, accreditation bodies, and professional societies can support faculty development, curriculum modernization, and adoption of best practices. Benchmarking against international standards can motivate quality and safety improvements.

7) Growing emphasis on quality, patient safety, and value-based care. As hospitals strengthen quality governance and measurement, they can integrate capacity building with quality improvement. Training that is linked to measurable outcomes (infection rates, medication errors, readmissions, patient experience) gains strategic importance and organizational support.

Strategies and Recommendations

A. Establish competency-based career pathways. Hospitals should define role-specific competency maps that include clinical, teamwork, quality, and digital competencies. Competency progression should be transparent, assessed, and linked to promotion criteria and privileges.

B. Provide protected learning time and structured CPD. Capacity building requires time. Hospitals can allocate protected hours per month for CPD, align training calendars with staffing plans, and provide blended learning (online + simulation + bedside coaching). CPD should prioritize high-risk clinical processes and local performance gaps.

C. Strengthen mentorship and preceptorship systems. Structured mentorship improves onboarding, reduces errors among early-career staff, and increases retention. Preceptors should be trained, recognized, and supported with reasonable workload adjustments.

D. Develop leadership at all levels. Leadership programs should include frontline charge nurses, department heads, and emerging leaders. Core content should include quality and safety, change management, communication, conflict resolution, data-driven decision making, and workforce wellbeing.

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E. Build digital health competence. Digital literacy training should be staged (basic to advanced) and role-specific. Hospitals should support super-users, provide rapid-response help for clinical systems, and train staff on safe documentation practices to prevent errors.
F. Integrate capacity building with quality improvement. Training priorities should be chosen based on surveillance and performance data (e.g., infection control audits, medication safety indicators, patient complaints). Teams should apply Plan–Do–Study–Act cycles and receive feedback on improvement impact.
G. Improve workforce planning and regional equity. Policymakers and health systems should use data to forecast specialty needs, optimize distribution, and incentivize practice in underserved regions. Tele-education and rotation programs can support professional development in remote facilities.
H. Support staff wellbeing and psychological safety. Capacity building flourishes in environments that support wellbeing. Interventions include workload redesign, adequate staffing ratios where feasible, rest and recovery systems, and a culture that encourages speaking up and learning from errors without blame.

Implementation Roadmap and Evaluation

Implementation should follow a staged roadmap:
Phase 1 (Assessment): Conduct a training needs assessment using clinical outcome data, incident reports, competency assessments, and staff surveys. Identify high-risk processes and priority specialties.
Phase 2 (Design): Build a multi-year capacity plan with defined competencies, curricula, simulation and bedside components, and a mentorship structure. Assign governance and accountability (e.g., education department, quality office, department leaders).
Phase 3 (Delivery): Implement blended learning with protected time, supervised practice, and coaching. Ensure equitable access across professions and sites.
Phase 4 (Measurement): Evaluate outcomes at three levels: (1) participation and satisfaction (attendance, perceived relevance), (2) competency change (skills assessments, audits), and (3) clinical impact (HAI rates, medication errors, length of stay, readmissions, patient experience).
Phase 5 (Sustainability): Embed learning into routine operations—regular morbidity and mortality meetings, safety huddles, audit-and-feedback, and annual competency reviews. Maintain faculty development and update curricula based on emerging needs.
A mature system links learning metrics to operational and clinical outcomes, turning hospitals into learning organizations where workforce capability continuously improves.

Conclusion

Building professional capacity of the healthcare workforce is a strategic necessity for Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation. The Kingdom's hospitals face substantial challenges,

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including workload pressures, variable training quality, leadership gaps, rapid digitalization, and the need for stronger interprofessional collaboration and research capacity. Nevertheless, significant opportunities exist through Vision 2030 reforms, expansion of education and training, competency regulation, simulation-based learning, digital platforms, and a stronger national focus on quality and value.

For capacity building to be effective, it must be competency-based, supported by protected learning time, reinforced through mentorship and leadership development, and measured using outcomes that matter to patients and health systems. By aligning workforce development with transformation goals and investing in learning infrastructure and culture, Saudi Arabia can strengthen workforce readiness, improve patient safety, and ensure sustainable, high-performing healthcare services across the Kingdom.

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ISSN:1000-3673
Received: 16-08-2025 Revised: 05-09-2025 Accepted: 23-10-2025

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