

### **Editorial Three:**

#### **COVID-19: All Health Workers are Frontline Staff**



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The announcement by Mr. President in the 5<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 address to the nation on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, a package of incentives for so called frontline health workers provoked controversy between officials of the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the leadership of the different organizations representing- doctors, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory technicians and physician assistants. The question is, who is a frontline health worker in the fight against COVID- 19? While the MOH took the position that frontline health workers were limited to so called critical staff providing COVID-19 related care and services, the leaders of the health workers opted a broader definition to include all the different categories of health workers.

The simmering tension between MOH and leadership of the health workers over this important question and its potential adverse consequences in the battle against COVID-19, forced Mr. President to summon the leadership of the various health and allied workers organizations to discuss and hopefully agree to a common definition who exactly is at the very forefront of the fight against COVID-19 in Ghana. The importance of this definition lies in the fact that the so-called front-liners will be entitled to heftier incentives than all other health workers.

We at SEND Ghana applaud the leadership of Ghanaian health workers for using the COVID-19 frontline health staff ‘controversy’ as an entry point to once again draw Government of Ghana and the President in particular’s attention to the poor conditions of services in the sector. Even more importantly, we commend the health workers for unanimously advocating for an inclusive and equitable approach to the provision of incentives during the COVID-19 pandemic operations. Health services, during a pandemic such as COVID -19, the workers leaders rightly argued, are best delivered through strong teamwork of the different health professions, backed by effective collaboration and coordination of all health institutions at the district, regional, and national levels. Therefore COVID -19 incentive scheme should be implemented in a manner that motivates and strengthens team work, while strengthening institutional collaboration in the sector.

SEND Ghana, guided by our Strategic Plan, Making Ghana Work for Equity, has over the years, emphasized that Ghana’s health care delivery system was underfunded, and this in turn deteriorates inequities and fragility of the sector. Moreover, this low funding

translates into weak staff morale and insufficiency of essential inputs and commodities, especially at the primary level where most Ghanaians access health care. More importantly, the health sector is highly dependent on donor support, especially for capital goods required to invest and expand services to cater to a growing population of about 30 million. Indeed, without significant financial and technical assistance from Ghana's development partners, government response to COVID-19, including the incentive package to health workers, would have been low key and ineffective.

Meanwhile, in 2005, Ghana was among the member states of the African Union who adopted the Abuja Declaration to commit a minimum 15 % of the national budgets to the health needs of their citizens. To the contrary, on average over the years, Ghana has devoted around 8.1 % per annum of its budget to the health sector. In 2020 when we are confronted with COVID-19, health sector accounts for a meager 7.6 % of the national budget! Of the budgetary allocation to the health sector, over 60% is spent on personnel salaries and benefits.

COVID-19, by exposing these weaknesses, has created an opportunity for the political leadership of Ghana to prioritize and mainstream the development of the health sector. SEND Ghana, therefore, will be holding Mr. President accountable for the commitment he made to the health workers as reported in the Daily Graphic of 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, **“President optimistic about robust health system after COVID-19”** and we emphasize that is equitable and sustainable.