by Norman Sartorius

# Brains in Movement

Every so often in the history of mankind there are periods marked by massive migration. Some eighteen hundred years ago, severe and long lasting draughts in central Asia produced a westward movement of a multitude of tribes and clans that became the main ancestors of today's Europeans. At other times and in other settings, populations moved, changing the face of other parts of the world, for example, from central America southwards and from East Africa into Asia. Archeologists, geographers, and historians – nowadays joined by geneticists[1] – have been mapping these movements and explaining the origin of our cultures, diseases, foodstuffs, and traditions.

And then, there are less momentous movements in today's world. By the end of 2004, around 180 million people were migrants[2] – only 3% of the world's population. Their numbers are growing and their movement is usually motivated by the search for a better income, less oppression, and a more acceptable quality of life for themselves and their children. They usually make a positive contribution to the country that receives them and many will also send part of the money they make back to the country of their origin, easing the difficulties of their families or friends. The sums involved may be large: the one million Indians living in the USA represent 0.1% of the population of India; yet their annual income equals 10% of the national product of their home country[3].

And, far lower in numbers, but possibly with a more significant impact are the movements of highly qualified persons who have begun to leave their country in increasing numbers in recent years. They leave Eastern and Central European countries to go to Western Europe, Northern America and Australia; others leave Western Europe to go to the USA. Many leave the developing world and seek employment in the industrialized countries. This movement of skilled personnel to another country (named brain drain some 50 years ago to describe the movement of experts to the USA and Canada) has over the past few years got new dimensions. Governments of the "importing" countries are now actively and openly supporting brain drain: the UK government has, for example, paid well known professionals to go to the third world countries and entice medical doctors to come to the United Kingdom. Other countries provide language training and a variety of benefits to attract skilled high- or mid-level personnel. The recognition of diplomas and qualifications is often less a sign of respect for another country's university system than an arrangement allowing to import graduates from that country.

In the past many measures had been tried to stop the brain drain. Some countries switched their university education from English to the national language so as to make it more difficult for their graduates to leave. In some instances the donor country has insisted on receiving a hefty sum, equivalent to the cost of training of a professional before issuing a visa or allowing the departure of the expert and his family. In some countries graduates had the obligation to spend a certain number of years in the service of their country: it was only after completing such a period of service that experts could consider departure. USSR and allied countries have requested their nationals

[1]It is a geneticist, Spencer Wells, who will lead the genographic project – supported by the National Geographic Society, The Wait Family Foundation and IBM – to explore over the next five years how humans populated the Earth and how they moved.

[2]International Organization for Migration: World Migration Report 2005, Geneva 2005.

[3]B. Mc Kinley, Migration is here to stay, so get used to it. International Herald Tribune; 24 June 2005.

Croat Med J 2005;46(6):1005-1006

serving abroad to contribute a good part of their salary to their government that, in turn, preserved their post at home and paid their local (much lower) salary into a local bank account. Not allowing families to leave the country and holding them hostage to ensure the return of the experts sent for temporary jobs or training to another country was also a measure used by many countries.

There is no doubt that movement of skilled persons will continue and that the size of the movement will be proportional to the difference between the benefits offered by the home and host countries. The question that is therefore before the governments of many lands is easy to pose and difficult to answer: how does one allow people freedom of movement but also preserves the services of people of excellent quality who have been trained at great expense in their country (and who would serve it much better than less qualified people or immigrants from even poorer countries that will have to be imported at often considerable cost once those trained at home leave for a long time or forever).

Many measures come to mind. The best solution would be to create work and living conditions at home that will equal those of the countries luring the experts to come. This is rarely possible and therefore other, partial solutions may have to be considered. It might be possible to think of creating more attractive offers to those who left their country while young and later in life feel sufficiently nostalgic – or fed-up with the country to which they migrated – to consider returning to their motherland. An arrangement allowing those tempted by emigrating to spend part of their time abroad and part of their time at home would be possible in a many situations. Monetary compensation for the training given to the donor country so as to increase its training capacities might be a reasonable demand of many of the poorer countries – particularly in view of the fact that the recipient countries would get graduates at a considerably lower cost than it would cost them to produce them. A voluntary contribution of the emigrant to support the education of a new graduate would be an acceptable proposal for many economical migrants – if based on a transparent and controlled structure.

It may be that none of the above possibilities has any other value than to remind educators, governments, and all of us that brain drain is a serious threat to the development of many countries in the world, that it has to be recognized and that it is necessary to invest just as much effort and time into resolving or preventing the brain drain problem as is being invested into thinking how to create new candidates for it.