

geographical asymmetries in the distribution of physicians, and difficulties in retaining them in certain areas of the country. This case study seeks to describe and analyse the impact of an incentives package introduced in 2015 that aimed to attract and retain physicians in underserved areas. Financial incentives data was gathered via a national health human resources information system. Non-financial incentives data was reported by health institutions through an online form. Document analysis was conducted to understand the scope of the incentives package and its amendments.

**Results:** The incentives package implemented in Portugal effectively deployed physicians to underserved areas, since it led to a fourteen-fold increase in physicians settling in underserved areas. In terms of retention, an average of 59% of the physicians that took up the incentives package are still practicing in the same underserved area. However, the difference between the retention levels of physicians under the incentives package and those not covered is minimal. To further reduce health inequities and achieve universal health coverage, a need exists to review the financial and non-financial incentives to better suit physicians' needs and expectations, as well as those of the National Health Service.

**Lessons:** The incentives package introduced in Portugal makes it clear that flexibility in the design of attraction and retention measures is crucial. It requires a long-term commitment and a recognition that each intervention should be assessed and adapted to local circumstances and context.

**Key messages:**

- The incentives package introduced in Portugal attracted physicians to underserved areas and led to a fourteen-fold increase in physicians settling in underserved areas.
- More than half of the physicians are still practicing in the same underserved health institution but the difference in retention against those not covered by the incentives package is minimal.

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**Incentives to attract and retain physicians to underserved areas - a case study from Portugal**

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**Issue:** Physician shortages in underserved areas are a common challenge for governments and policymakers worldwide, including in Europe. Meanwhile, a knowledge gap exists on effective measures to address the issue.

**Description:** According to WHO Europe, one of ten actions to strengthen the healthcare workforce is to develop strategies to attract and retain health workers in rural and remote areas. Portugal faces