



9 November 2015

United Nations Medical Directors' Statement of Concern

in regard to proposed amendments to staff compensation package by ICSC

The United Nations Medical Directors' Working Group (UNMDWG) expresses its concern regarding the proposed amendments to the United Nations compensation package, as they pertain to the health of staff serving in hardship duty stations.

The UNMDWG acknowledges that in usual circumstances, they are not a party to compensation package reviews. However, given the grave concerns about the cumulative impacts of successive reviews, the UNMDWG, as the occupational health experts in the UN system, feel an obligation to document the concerns identified below.

The UNMDWG notes that the current proposal eliminates several administrative measures originally designed to mitigate the adverse health effects of working in hardship duty stations. These include accelerated home leave, DSA for Rest and Recuperation, and the Administrative Place of Assignment for staff in non-family duty stations.

Loss of DSA for R&R creates the potential for staff to choose not to take R&R, or leaving their duty station for far fewer days. This particularly impacts staff whose family home is so remote from their duty station that reaching it in the span of R&R is both financially and logistically impractical. These staff must pay for accommodation, and in the absence of DSA, there is a strong financial disincentive to take R&R.

The impact on health of reduced R&R is both mental and physical. Fatigue, burnout, depression and anxiety are all associated with prolonged exposure to stressful environments. Because of poor medical infrastructure in many duty stations, basic healthcare is attended to whilst on R&R. Neglect of mental and physical health is a direct consequence of reduced R&R.

Loss of the Administrative Place of Assignment means that staff in non-family duty stations have no family home close to their duty station, unless they voluntarily relocate their family, or they happen to be stationed close enough to their home. In the absence of a family home close to the duty station, the loss of DSA in R&R is likely to result in avoidance of R&R travel. Such staff may not see their family for prolonged periods. The reason that accelerated home leave was originally introduced – was to ensure that family integrity was supported, and serving staff could maintain ties with their children and spouse.

The proposed elimination of accelerated home leave will in addition now lead to staff not being supported to visit their families more than once every two years. This increases the risk of marital breakdown, family conflict and child behavioural problems. The link between family support and personal resilience is well established. Personal resilience is a core requirement for service in hardship duty stations.

Against the above background, the UNMDWG recommends that:

1. Changes to the compensation package of staff in hardship duty stations should not be made without an assessment of the potential impact of such changes on staff personal resilience and mental health;
2. Until such time as a health impact assessment has been concluded, accelerated home leave should be preserved;
3. A comprehensive review of the use of R&R should be undertaken, with a view to establishing minimum requirements from an Occupational Health perspective.