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Changing public health needs and the role of capacity building Institutions in India

Tackling these challenges necessitates the implementation of robust public health strategies and strengthening of the capacity-building institutions. COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need to have a high capacity and high-quality public health system with professionals at various levels trained dynamically as per the needs of the ever-evolving public health scenario

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Over the past decade, India has experienced significant socioeconomic development, particularly reflected in the progressive reduction in maternal and child mortality, and growth rate of its gross domestic product (GDP). However, disparities among various geographic areas and socioeconomic groups persist. Moreover, public health landscape is undergoing a gradual change, driven by demographic shifts, climate changes, lifestyle changes, and emerging health threats. Tackling these challenges necessitates the implementation of robust public health strategies and strengthening of the capacity-building institutions. COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need to have a high capacity and high-quality public health system with professionals at various levels trained dynamically as per the needs of the ever-evolving public health scenario.

Current Scenario and the major public health challenges in India

The progress made in various public health domains in India such as Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health, along with Communicable Diseases and Sexual and Reproductive Health has been encouraging. Neonatal-, infant- and under-five mortality have been continuously declining. The life expectancy has increased to more than 67 years. India has also succeeded in eradication or elimination of diseases, such as polio, guinea worm disease, yaws, and neonatal tetanus. This progress can be attributed to the Government's iron will to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) through numerous government initiatives implemented over the years. Recent progress made with respect to strategies and national programs like RMNCH+A, Mission Indradhanush, National Program for Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD), National Tuberculosis Elimination Program (NTEP), Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY and PM-ABHIM, has been encouraging.

Despite the significant progress achieved, India faces several persisting or emerging public health challenges, including the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – cancers, hypertension, diabetes; emergence of new infections, resulting in a dual burden of diseases; high burden of nutritional problems such as anemia and child undernutrition; and increasing anti-microbial resistance. Additionally, the growing geriatric population poses increasing demand for geriatric healthcare services that requires extensive policy planning and robust implementation of measures at the grassroot level.

The elderly are affected by double burden of physical and mental health challenges. Adverse mental health has a substantial impact on their attitude on life, potentially leading to a lack of motivation and purpose. Climate change has emerged as another major threat with enormous health implications influencing health, through air pollution and new forms of diseases. Extreme weather events and forced displacements due to natural disasters cause mental health and nutritional consequences placing increased strain on healthcare infrastructure. According to WHO estimates, climate change is predicted to result in additional 2,50,000 fatalities between year 2030 and 2050, with cost ramifications projected to be between US$2-4 billion annually.

Existing Government Strategies and Focus

The Government of India has articulated a clear vision for core public health challenges, particularly in terms of accessibility, affordability, and the effective utilization of healthcare services. Health outcomes in India have improved or are predicted to improve as a result of a sustained increase in the healthcare budget backed by programs and strategies like the National Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, which includes PM-JAY, Advt PM-ABHIM, ABDM, Poshan Abhiyan, and Immunization Program, to mention a few. The Government's commitment to improving the health access and outcomes is evident by the recent efforts to upgrade and expand Subcentres and PHCs to Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, establishment of Day Care Cancer Centres at District Hospital level, and promotion of digital initiatives to improve the efficiency of healthcare delivery. These measures highlight the Government's focused approach towards improving public health infrastructure and accessibility, moving towards the goal of Universal Health Coverage.

Role of Public Health Education and Capacity Building of Health Workforce

Massive capacity building efforts are required to equip healthcare professionals, policymakers, and community health workers with the necessary skills to tackle India's evolving public health challenges. Although, a lot has been done in various healthcare domains, the Indian health system has often faced challenges due to understaffing, uneven distribution of skilled health workforce, resource constraints, digital divide, and insufficiently subscribed training initiatives. Additionally, the limited number of healthcare workers and the inadequate mix of skills among them have compounded the complexity of addressing health system challenges. Upskilling the

existing workforce as per the emerging requirements and developing a pool of human resource with multi-lateral expertise is need of the hour. India must invest in Human Resources for Health (HRH) to increase the number of active healthcare workers and enhance the skill mix. This necessitates substantial investment in public health and technical capacity building institutions supported by inter-sectoral collaborations. Additionally, it is crucial to promote the qualified health professionals to serve in the under-served areas and provide further training and skill development for existing but inadequately qualified health workers. Innovative training methods utilizing digital technology and e-learning platforms can achieve saturation and continuous professional development for healthcare workers in remote areas. Collaboration with private healthcare providers, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations can enhances the coverage by sharing infrastructure and resources and provides funding and research opportunities.

In conclusion, addressing India's evolving public health needs requires a multifaceted approach, including the pursuit of universal health coverage, the adoption of digital health technologies, and the enhancement of public health education and workforce capacity. Public health institutions need to be strengthened through policy reforms and strategic investments. A well-trained workforce backed by a strong institutional support is essential for building a resilient and equitable healthcare system capable of meeting current and future challenges.

This article is authored by Dr. Dheeraj Shah, Director of NIHFW and coauthored by Geetanjli Agrawal, Advisor at Primus Partners. (DISCLAIMER: The views expressed are solely of the author and ETHealthworld.com does not necessarily subscribe to it. ETHealthworld.com shall not be responsible for any damage caused to any person/organisation directly or indirectly)