

Call for departments of public health at all medical colleges in India

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ABSTRACT

Public Health has always been important for the general public, governments, and governance as it deals with the objective of improving population health through prevention, promotion, and health education. Public Health is defined as “the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society” (Acheson, 1988; WHO). The COVID 19 pandemic has brought a focus on the concept of public health more than ever. Independent departments of Public Health do not exist at medical colleges in India. Public health is a multidisciplinary domain. The body of knowledge is cross-cutting and multidimensional in nature. Public health education is optimal only with the contribution of the participating faculty from different educational and professional backgrounds. Lack of strong public health academics may adversely impact the capacity to formulate indigenous public health policy. In many parts of the developing world, public health policies are heavily influenced by the knowledge developed by the western universities within the domain of global health. Global health policies and goals become synonymous with national health goals. For the democratic republic of India, there is an urgent need to strengthen the public health education system so that the future challenges of health, safety, economy, security can be met. The National Medical Commission (NMC) has invited comments on the draft postgraduate medical education regulations 2021. It is an apt opportunity to fundamentally reform public health education in India.

Keywords: Public Health, MPH, Community Medicine, COVID Pandemic, Health Policy, Medical Education Reforms, National Medical Commission

“Any thoughtful observer of medical schools will be troubled by the regularity with which the educational system of these schools is isolated from the health service systems of the countries concerned. In many countries these schools and faculties are, indeed, the proverbial ivory towers. They prepare their students for certain high, obscure, ill-defined and allegedly international ‘academic standards’ and for dimly perceived requirements of the twenty-first century, largely forgetting or even ignoring the pressing health needs of today’s and tomorrow’s society.” - Dr Mahler, Ex Director WHO.

Importance of Public Health

Public Health is defined as “the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the

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organized efforts of society” (Acheson, 1988; WHO). Public Health has always been important for the general public, governments, and governance as it deals with the objective of improving population health through prevention, promotion, and health education. The COVID 19 pandemic has brought a focus on the concept of public health more than ever. For two consecutive years, the whole world is under global economic lockdown due to an unprecedented public health challenge. One can easily see the overlap of public health implications on economic policy, human development and national security. It is time to revisit public health education in India.

Public Health: An Independent Discipline

Public health is a multidisciplinary academic domain. The body of knowledge is cross-cutting and multidimensional in nature. Public health education is optimal only when the participating faculty are drawn from relevant educational and professional backgrounds. The peer learning group is also expected to a diverse group of professions. India has the largest medical education system in the

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world. There are more than five hundred medical colleges that have the capacity to produce about 100,000 MBBS graduate doctors annually. A uniform curriculum for MBBS is delivered across India under the supervision of the National Medical Commission (NMC). The erstwhile entity of the NMC, the Medical Council of India (MCI) was dissolved in 2018 through an act of parliament. The post-graduate qualifications are awarded by the medical colleges and the universities but they must be recognized by the NMC. Strangely enough the departments of of Public Health were never established at medical colleges in India. Medical students do not have exposure to multidisciplinary facet and strengths of Public Health discipline, as an outcome public health remains a very low priority career choice among medical students in India.^[1]

Role of Community Medicine

Traditionally the departments of 'Community Medicine' have been considered synonymous with public health education in India. Historically, Community Medicine departments have shouldered the responsibility of imparting public health education exclusively to medical doctors. Community Medicine can be credited for producing a few brilliant and outstanding medical experts within the domain of public health. However, Community Medicine has a different mandate and role within the medical education and healthcare delivery system. These departments were established to prepare 'Social Physicians' and later to adopt the WHO recommended 48th World Health Assembly) ROME (reorientation of medical education) program. From 'Social and Preventive Medicine' the name was later changed to 'Community Medicine' to emphasize the clinical role. By the name itself, 'Community Medicine' indicates an exclusive licensing qualification for physicians and medical doctors. Only MBBS students and MD (community medicine) trainees are eligible for education at these departments. All faculty positions are reserved for medical doctors. Non-medical professionals, even other non-healthcare professionals have no interface or engagement with the departments of community medicine. For example, a senior nursing public health educator is not eligible to become a faculty of the department of Community Medicine. None of these departments award the qualification of MPH (Masters in Public Health). There is strong resistance against multidisciplinary learning and inclusion of faculty from relevant disciplines such as sociology, economics, and behavioral sciences. Looking back this approach has been an injustice to a country like India with a 1.3 billion population. The surrogate role of Public Health by Community Medicine has not been able to fulfill the humongous challenges of public health that India faces today.

Future of Community Medicine in India

The experts of community medicine and public health have expressed the dilemma prevalent among the community medicine professionals. Overlaps and differences between community medicine and public health have been articulated. The current postgraduates in community medicine are at a loss to understand their role in mitigating the health situation in the country. The

future to them appears to be only in academics, as responsible public health positions in international organizations are open to everyone and not just doctors of community medicine. Furthermore, community medicine is standing at a crossroads between family medicine and public health.^[2,3]

Calcutta Declaration on Public Health 2015

The Indian Public Health Association and the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) organized the 14th World Congress on Public Health in Kolkata, on 11–15 February 2015. The conference called for promoting Public Health as a discipline and as an essential requirement for health development. The conference participants developed the 'The Calcutta Declaration on Public Health'. The declaration states that "We, the participants in this Regional Conference on Public Health in South-East Asia in the 21st Century, appreciate the substantial achievements made in improving the health status of the people in the countries of the South-East Asia Region during the past decades. However, we enter the 21st century with an unfinished agenda of existing health concerns, and new and complex challenges that demand innovative solutions. We uphold the centrality of meeting the health needs of the community and our responsibility to preserve, protect and promote the health of the people. We commit ourselves to the goals of poverty alleviation, equity and social justice, gender equality, and universal primary education, which are all essential elements in the pursuit of health for all. We recognize that expertise and experience in Public Health and capacity-building are essential for sustaining partnerships in designing, developing, and providing health for the community. And we emphasize the importance of Public Health as a multidisciplinary endeavor to meet the health needs of people."^[4]

Model Curriculum Handbook: Masters in Public Health (MPH): Government of India

A model curriculum for public health has been released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Government of India (GOI), in 2017-18. The objective of the course has been defined as 'to prepare a competent cadre of professionals who have a basic understanding of the various aspects of public health and are able to successfully apply this knowledge towards meeting public health challenges in the Indian context.' In this document, the specific competencies have been defined as follows: (a) Apply the course learning to the public health system and its challenges (b) Develop, implement and evaluate key public health policies (c) Develop and demonstrate competency in managing health systems at different levels and (d) Develop competency in research.

Eligibility Criteria for the Masters in Public Health Program

The model curriculum handbook states that 'in the Indian context, we see a very important role for candidates from multiple

professional backgrounds within MPH programs. Thereby, the eligibility criteria for the MPH program in India may include both science as well as non-science graduates.

The following are suggested eligibility criteria for the MPH Program in India, as per this document are: graduates in (a) Medicine/AYUSH/Dentistry/Veterinary Sciences/Allied and Health Sciences/Life Sciences (b) Statistics/Biostatistics/Demography/Population Studies/Nutrition/Sociology/Psychology/Anthropology/Social Work. The model curriculum handbook further emphasizes that although highly recommended, candidates need not be restricted to the above disciplines and graduates from selected backgrounds other than these, may be taken by the Universities when considering the overall aptitude and eligibility of a certain candidate.^[5]

Renewed interest in Public Health courses

On a positive note, a few of the new AIIMS (All Indian Institutes of Medical Sciences) have started to open schools of public health within their campuses. However AIIMS institutes are not under the preview of the National Medical Commission, and all 500 plus medical colleges do not have any mandate to open a department of public health. Not having departments and educational programs in Public Health, remains one of the fundamental fallacies of the mainstream medical education system in India. Establishment of IIPHS (Indian Institutes of Public Health) under the aegis of Public Health Foundation of India have also given impetus to the public health courses in India. There is widespread evolving interest in public health programs. Several other universities also have started MPH course.

Way forward

The National Medical Commission (NMC) has invited comments on the draft postgraduate medical education regulations 2021.^[6] It is an apt opportunity to fundamentally reform public health education in India. It would be a tragedy if the enormous resources of the largest medical education system in the world don't impart multidisciplinary Public Health education. It is not only harmful to the medical students but the health system of the country at large. COVID pandemic has shown that the medical professionals have lost out within the public

health policy decision-making process due to a very weak conceptual understanding of the complex public health system of the country. A strong public health education system is the foundation for any resilient healthcare delivery system. Lacking indigenous public health academics may adversely impact the capacity to formulate independent public health policies and programs. In many parts of the developing world, public health policies are heavily influenced by the knowledge developed by the western universities within the domain of global health. Global health policies and goals tend to become synonymous with national health goals. For the democratic republic of India, there is an urgent need to revamp the public health education system so that the future challenges of healthcare, economy and national security can be met.

Disclaimer: The viewpoint presented in this paper are those of author and not representative of any organization. We expect diverse opinions on this subject. Responses inform of letter to editor are welcome.

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