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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The importance of PHC-based measures in controlling COVID-19 outbreak: Implications for global health system



L'importance des mesures basées sur les systèmes de santé nationaux dans la lutte contre l'épidémie de COVID-19 : implications pour le système de santé mondial

Keywords COVID-19; Primary Health Care

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Year 2020 is the 42nd anniversary of the Alma-Ata statement on Primary Health Care (PHC), the statement that all countries approved and administered PHC as a key to achieve health for all strategies. Forty-two years ago, World Health Organisation (WHO) put the PHC on the agenda as a basic health care, which is acceptable, executable, accessible, and affordable for all countries in terms of scientific, practical, social, and technological aspects. When we look at the main components of PHC written 42 years ago, it seems that they can be currently applied for COVID-19 outbreak. These components include healthcare education for prevalent healthcare problems, promoting healthy nutrition, vaccination, prevention, controlling and treating prevalent diseases, providing essential medicines, providing safe water, and mother and child care [1]. Moreover, in different textbooks, such as the milestone book named Preventive and Social Medicine (J.E. Park 1989), the priority of prevention to treatment has been discussed and PHC services have been introduced as the cornerstone of healthcare services [2].

PHC system has proved its effectiveness and responsiveness many times. For example, Iran has been always honoured and praised by WHO as a pioneer country in the deployment of PHC components and also has been introduced as a role model for the Eastern Mediterranean region. Iran has eradicated many contagious diseases before many countries, has deployed PHC services, has promoted mother and child health status and has increased life expectancy [3].

Globally, on the contrary to the PHC principles and WHO guidelines, the PHC system has been replaced by hospitals as the frontline of fighting against COVID-19. Hence, physicians and nurses, instead of PHC personnel, provide services for

the patients, and unfortunately some of hospital providers have died due to exposure with the patients.

PHC human resources could provide valuable services on public education, patient screening, disinfection of public places, and follow-up of patients. The screening of patients and promoting public health literacy, as the PHC functions, lead to decrease the visit to hospitals and thereby save hospital precious resources. One of the important issues in the treatment of patients in hospitals is the exposure of hospital staff with patients' respiratory secretions. In this regard, occupational health specialists, as members of PHC teams, can provide valuable services in designing personal protection devices, and also in educating and supervising on their correct use. As the evidence from the China COVID-19 outbreak indicates, most people have been infected inside hospitals. So, it is necessary to provide the necessary arrangements to cut the transmission chain. This can be performed through infection control, standard ventilation of various wards, continuous disinfection of surfaces and equipment, and finally collection and disposal of infectious waste by environmental health specialists of PHC teams. Another group of PHC specialists are epidemiologists and primary healthcare managers who can provide supervision on the disease trend and infected foci, analyse the disease map, administer quarantine, and other similar measures.

The key to control COVID-19 is not merely adding ICU and hospital beds and buying advanced hospital equipment, as if the most important healthcare indices are not the number of hospital beds. The key is in the hands of PHC providers who prevent disease deployment and transmission. Since people should simply stay at home, the first line is houses, alleys and streets and hence, the first defenders of health are those who decrease the high burden of hospital visiting people. The experience of Iran healthcare system in mobilising PHC workers to provide a rapid and comprehensive response to COVID-19 and other previous healthcare outbreaks [4], is an indicative of PHC effectiveness and responsiveness and its ability to be replicated in other countries.

Ethical statement

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Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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A. Koolivand^a, S. Amini^{b,*}

^a Associate Professor of Environmental Health,
Department of Environmental Health Engineering,
Faculty of Health, Arak University of Medical
Sciences, Arak, Iran

^b Assistant Professor of Health Management,
Health Management Department, Faculty of
Health, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak,
Iran

* Corresponding author at: School of Health, Arak
University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran.
E-mail addresses: sa.536@yahoo.com,
s.amini@arakmu.ac.ir (S. Amini)

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