

India Badly Needs Public Health Education



Summary:

India has been praised for its remarkable economic growth. However, economic progress is not balanced given the slow pace of improvements in public health indicators. India lags severely behind in terms of achieving the real benefits of its resources, due to weaknesses in policies, investment and education for a strong public health workforce.

- The country faces very grim challenges in improving its public health statistics, including indicators of poor maternal and child mortality and morbidity, a high level of preventable infectious diseases, rising trends of chronic diseases such as diabetes, strokes, coronary heart disease, along with serious health system related issues.

What's missing?

A public health workforce requires people, who have qualifications in public health education, to occupy positions exclusively or substantially focused on population health. Public health professionals play a central role in ensuring the appropriate management of all aspects of the healthcare system: from logistics and facility management, to finances, and the monitoring of healthcare status and healthcare interventions.

- However, **not enough attention has been paid when it comes to ensuring quality**. Until now, no institute in the country has taken the initiative to introduce a Bachelors (degree) programme in public health, though various institutes under the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH) were established in select states.

- **India's public health workforce infrastructure is inadequate, in terms of numbers and quality**, to tackle its current and future public healthcare issues where a deficiency of trained public health professionals remains a primary concern.
- The quality of public health professionals produced in India is still questionable and the deficiency of qualified professionals aggravates the situation. Public health training remains neglected in the country.

What can be done?

- Local colleges and universities should be supported financially and encouraged to develop **undergraduate degree programmes in public health**, especially in poorer states. This will ensure that the needs and requirements of a public health professional workforce in India are fulfilled.
- **Bachelors level training for healthcare promotion and public health managers is vital to the infrastructure development of essential services**, such as environmental health, road and workplace safety, immunisation, nutrition and tropical disease control. Such programmes, like preventable morbidity and mortality, are required in developing countries that face various inequities and the growing needs of an ageing population.
- Given the current need for an adequately trained public health workforce cadre in India, developing public health undergraduate degrees should be prioritised over introducing more master of public health programmes, although both are needed.
- A **multidisciplinary workforce** is badly needed in order to promote a proactive environment for public health education, research, advocacy and services, that meet international accreditation standards.

Challenges ahead:

Progress even in this field will require the establishment of international standards of accreditation. **In India, there is no single uniform, overarching, body or council, responsible for public health education in the country as a whole.** Medical Council of India (MCI) is the statutory body responsible for establishing and maintaining uniform standards of medical education, that is offered at the medical college level only. **Public health training at non-medical colleges or universities come under the purview of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) or the University Grants Commission (UGC).** Thus, the very first challenge for India is to decide who will lead the delegation while introducing undergraduate degree courses in public health?

More adequately trained public health professionals could be produced if the candidates are oriented towards it in the undergraduate degree level. This includes

upgrading the current public health workforce with technical level diplomas, as well as attracting new, young and highly motivated candidates. But **absorption into the network of the public health professionals remains a daunting challenge.**

Way ahead:

Its time for the government to create awareness among the people about the Public HealthCare System. Other stakeholders including industry leaders, non-governmental organisations, and public health research institutes can be taken along. India must find a way to promote undergraduate degrees in public health education so as to expand the qualified workforce and in order to be successful in meeting the health challenges of this rapidly developing nation.

- Sustainable economic growth requires robust policies that improves the population's health and raises productivity levels across the nation. *Since 1993, the World Bank has considered investments in health as a vital factor to promote economic growth and not as, previously considered, a burden on economic progress.*

Conclusion:

Public health is a part of the foundations of any modern society that values human life and health, and seeks sustainable economic and social growth. What is now required is a change in healthcare education priorities, in order to have an optimum number of public health professionals in India. In part, this change should adopt the relatively new trends in Europe and the United States (US), promoting public health undergraduate degree programmes within existing universities or colleges on a broad scale. The government at the national and state levels, led by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, should institute policies and incentives that promote bachelors degree programmes. The government must also mandate that attending such degree programmes is a prerequisite for occupying positions in the ministry, and field service systems across the nation.