



Mantle of government and public health: Existing scenario and the future trajectory

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Abstract

After India got independence, the Governments of the day left no stone unturned to attend to the problems that were plaguing the nation. The Indian state being a welfare state was obsessed with providing a healthy and happy life-style to the people of the nation. One of the primordial concerns of the government happens to be the public health. Providing good health to the masses happens to be a formidable challenge for the government partly because of the ignorance of the people and partly because of the eating, hygiene and other health practices of the people. The government wanted to inculcate good practices among the people with regard to public health and has witnessed many hurdles in its attempt to affect the lives of the people of this great nation. Some of the health issues that have been looming large in the face of the nation are tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy, high child and maternal mortality and to this nefarious list has joined the HIV/AIDS menace and the government has been addressing these issues with lot of commitment in a concerted manner. The scientific advances and the social development have synergized to provide good health care to the people and it has resulted in the decreased mortality as well as birth rates. The present research study is a review of the existing governmental machinery which is catering to the need of the public health of the masses, its limitations its success along with its future trajectory.

Keywords: governments, healthy, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

The issue of public health always presented formidable and daunting challenges to the Governments of the day since the inception of the country as an independent nation. The new agenda that is looming large for the Public Health in India apart from others includes demographic transition, where the number of elderly in ratio to the younger generation is growing enormously, the epidemiological transition where the ever-increasing burden of chronic non-communicable diseases is growing by day and the environmental challenges, which are leading to enormous changes in the environment and in the process is posing a serious threat not only to the public health of the people but to the very survival of the human race. The unfinished and the ever unfolding the agenda of HIV/AIDS pandemic, the maternal and child mortality and other communicable diseases still exert colossal strain on the already burdened and overstretched health systems. Silent epidemics in India like the tobacco-related deaths which range from 800,000 to 900,000 per year are leading to the immense economic and social losses. Mental, neurological coupled with substance use disorders are also causing substantial and massive burden of disability and disease. The mounting toll of road deaths coupled with injuries which account to nearly 2-5 million hospitalizations and more than 100, 000 deaths per year makes it next in the list of causes for death after silent epidemics. Behind the facade of the stark figures lies excruciating human suffering. The public health systems are unable to grapple with and handle the effects of the existing communicable and non-communicable diseases and also with the ever-growing burden of emerging and re-emerging diseases such as malaria, drug resistant tuberculosis, avian flu,

SARS, and the current H1N1 pandemic. The scarcity of the financial resources and the inefficient utilization of the already scarce resources are culminating in inequalities in health. Likewise issues such as Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights continue to pose serious challenges to the health system and the health systems of tomorrow will face new challenges of tectonic proportions. The roots of the causes of health inequalities like in the political, economic and social mechanisms which are culminating in social stratification basing on education, income, gender, occupation, race or ethnicity. Devoid of the desired progress on these underlying social determinants of health has been deemed as a quite conspicuous failure of public health. In the present era of globalization, the numerous social, political and economic events that are taking place across the world tend to have an impact on the fuel and food prices of all the countries across the globe and the global recessions which happen time and again have far reaching consequences on all the countries.

Public Health Issues

In order to handle the aforementioned formidable colossal challenges, there is a crying need to revitalize and resuscitate the primary health care based on the principals which were enunciated at the Alma-Ata in the year 1978. These include equity, universal access and coverage, committee participation not only in defining but also in implementing health agendas and intersectoral approaches to health issues. These principles though remain valid to this day need to be interpreted in the backdrop of the dramatic changes that have been taking place in the health sector for the past 30 years. That attempts to achieve "Health For All" have been revitalized in the form of

“Millennium Development Goals”. The main focus of Public Health is not only disease prevention but also disease control at the level of the population, through concerted efforts and informed choices of not only society but also private and public communities, individuals and organizations. Nevertheless, the role of the governments is highly crucial and imperative for taking these challenges into cognizance and achieving the health equity. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) plays a primordial role in guiding the destinies of India’s public health system. The contributions to the health of the population emanates from systems which are outside the purview of the formal education system and this capacity and potential of intersectoral contributions to the health of the communities is being increasingly acknowledged and recognised across the world. Thus, the role of the government in impacting the health of the population is not limited within the health sector. Various sectors outside the health systems can also have a role to play in the health of population. The crucial and important issues that the health systems must need to confront and handle are inadequate material and financial resources, issues related to health workforce and the stewardship challenge of putting into implementation the pro-equity health policies in a pluralistic environment. The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) which was launched by the Indian Government is a quantum jump forward in instituting effective integration and convergence of all health services and which in the process is affecting the architectural correction in the health care delivery system in the country. The Integrated Disease Surveillance Project was put in place with an intention to establish a dedicated highway of information which pertains to the occurrence of diseases and which is required for both prevention and containment of the diseases at the community level. However, the slow pace of implementation which has been witnessed is due to inadequate efforts in involving and accommodating the critical actors who are outside the purview of the public sector. The health profiles that are being published by the government periodically should be utilized to help the community’s prioritize their health problems and to inform the decision-makers of the locality. The Public Health laboratories that have been put in place have a substantial capacity to lend support to the government’s diagnostic as well as the research activities on the health with threats and risks. However, these facilities are not put to proper use. The mechanisms to monitor the epidemiological challenges like the occupational health, the mental health of the population and the other environmental risks are yet to be thought of and to be put in place. There is a dire need for buttressing the research infrastructure in the departments pertaining to community medicine in various institutes across the country and to foster and nurture their partnerships with state health services.

For the sake of successful public health outcomes, there is a dire need to have a good system of regulation. This ensures reduced exposure to diseases through proper enforcement of sanitary codes for example, slaughterhouse hygiene, water quality monitoring and food safety. There exist glaring gaps between the enforcement, monitoring as well as evaluation and it is resulting in a dilapidated public health system. The reasons for this state of affairs, apart from others, happened to

be poor improper allocation of financial resources for the sake public health, lack of proper commitment and appropriate leadership on the part of public health functionaries and dearth of community involvement. The revival of the public health regulation is possible through the committed and concerted efforts by the governments of the day through both by updation and putting into effect the public health laws, increasing the public awareness of the existing laws and their enforcement procedures, and consulting stakeholders and by increasing the awareness of the general public about the existing laws and the procedures related to their enforcement. Efforts must be made to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs. Likewise, the youth must be taught and been made aware of the dangers related to tobacco smoking and efforts must be made to promote their physical activity. These are just a couple of examples of the behaviour change communication which will focus on ways that will motivate the people to make proper health choices. No stone must be left unturned to promote the development of community-wide education programs and other activities related to health promotion so that this will really help the people to maintain good health. The effectiveness of health promotion can be achieved by following and extending it to rural areas also. By observing days like ‘Heart Day’ and ‘Diabetes Day’ in the countryside we can ensure that creating and spreading of awareness at the grass root level also takes place.

There are several lacunae that need to be properly identified and addressed with regard to the development of the required human resources for catering to the needs of public health services. There is an urgent and a dire need put in place training facilities for the specialists related to public health along with identifying the scope for the specialists for their contribution in the field of public health. The untiring efforts that are being made by the Public Health Foundation of India is a positive step in the right direction to redress the limited institutional capacity the country has by paying attention to and strengthening research and policy development along with training in public health. It is highly imperative that the medical workforce in the public health are imparted pre-service training related to leadership and other skills that are really essential for the practice of public health. It is highly vital that consummate changes are incorporated into the curriculum related to under graduation for the sake of capacity building in emerging areas like adolescent health, geriatric care and mental health. Similarly leadership qualities and management skills must be imparted to the medical officers who are in service. Efforts must also be made to enhance the number of training institutes and the number of paramedical workers who get trained in these institutes in the country. One of the most visible strategies to give direction to the activities of the health sector is to identify the targets and objectives. For example, in the United States of America the “Healthy People 2010” came out with a simple but a formidable idea by presenting health objectives in a format which facilitated the participation of diverse groups, to synergize their efforts and work as a strong team. Likewise, in India also, we need to have a plan which helps us to provide “better health for all” that can be utilized by communities, states, professional organizations and other sectors. It will also enable changes for resource allocations for interventions related to public health

and act as a platform for a concerted and united intersectoral action and in the process enable a coherence in policy.

It is highly imperative for the Ministry of Health to form strong and abiding partnerships with other agents which are involved in the public health, because many factors which are related to the public health outcomes lie outside the purview of its direct jurisdiction. It is not only a tough task but also a politically challenging one to make public health a shared value across the various sectors however such collective action is highly important and is the need of the hour.

Social Determinants of Health

Living Conditions

Sanitation along with safe drinking water is a factor to be reckoned with for providing good health to the people at large. These two entities would directly contribute to 70-80% reduction in the case of communicable diseases. It is both achievable and affordable to provide full coverage of the supply of drinking water as well as sanitation through the existing programs to all the habitations. However, a lot of dedication and determination is needed both on the part of the general public along with the efforts of the governments.

Urban Planning

Special attention is needed for the providing of certain basic amenities and services in urban areas like the supply of safe drinking water, solid waste management and sewerage. The Jawahar Lal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission is working in not less than 35 cities to enable the creating of financially sustainable cities in tune with the Millennium Development Goals and the same program needs to be expanded to provide coverage to the entire nation. The other issues that need to be addressed on an urgent basis are urban poverty alleviation and housing.

Revival of Rural Infrastructure and Livelihood

The rural areas must be developed on priority basis for the development of the nation as a whole. With regard to the rural areas, there is a dire need for action on the following fronts: promotion of mechanization of agriculture, improving the efficiency of investments that are made in the rural areas, diversifying and providing better access to credit, land and skills, rationalizing the subsidies that are provided by the government.

Education

It is a well-known fact that education happens to be a highly important variable which facilitates development and has a considerable role in promoting the awareness relating to the public health of the people. The elementary education in the country has reached a major milestone and we need to thank Sarva Siksha Abhayan on that account and for the consolidation of the gains that they have achieved till now, there's a necessity to plan a mission for the secondary education as well. The "Right of children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill 2009" aims at providing education to those children who are in the age groups of 6-14 years and this happens to be a thought in the right direction and will enable in improving the literacy of the Indian population.

Nutrition and Early Child Development

In the 11th five-year plan, new ideas have been conceived and new innovations like the universalization of Integrated Child Development Services (IC DS) have been put in place and the scheme has enabled in setting up of mini-Angawadi centres in the deprived, backward and remote areas of the country and these are facilitating inclusive growth of the rural areas also. It is incumbent on the part of the government to strengthen IC DS in certain non-performing states basing on the gains that are experienced from other successful and performing models like the State of Tamil Nadu where the kitchens are upgraded with LPG connection, electrification and pressure cookers are provided along with the use of iron-fortified salt to cater to the needs of anaemia of the general population. There is also an urgency to address the micronutrient deficiency and appropriate measures like dietary diversification, food fortification, horticultural intervention, nutritional supplementation and other public health measures should be taken care of by intersectoral coordination through the intervention of various departments like agriculture, health, rural and urban development, women and child development.

Social Security Measures

The complexion of the rural India can be taken care of by the social and economic spin-offs of the employment security providing scheme namely Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. It differentiates itself from the other poverty alleviation projects that have been taken up by the governments till now with regard to the concept of citizenship and entitlement. The issue however with this Scheme is that while the wages and employment opportunities of the rural workforce have taken centre stage, the development of the community assets and infrastructure are relegated to the background. This Scheme has the potential and the much-needed manpower to implement intersectoral projects like laying of water pipes, laying roads, horticulture, social forestry, rainwater harvesting and anti-erosion projects. It is incumbent upon the government to effectively tap the unlimited potential of the social capital that is being generated by the scheme. The public distribution system should also be developed and further strengthened with the help of out-of-the-box thinking to enable the curbing of the inclusion and exclusion errors and at the same time increase the range of commodities to be distributed for the people who are living in pathetic and abject poverty. It is also highly necessary that the government puts proper action plans in place to effectively increase the domestic production of the food grains, raise the income of the consumers to buy food and at the same time make agriculture veritably remunerative for the farming sections of the society. The Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana and Aam Admi Bhima Yojana are providing adequate Social Security for the unorganised sector (90% of the country's workforce). Similarly the National Old Age Pension Scheme is providing income and Social Security to the growing old age population in the country.

Gender Mainstreaming and Empowerment

It is highly essential that woman-specific interventions in all programs, policies and systems need to be launched at the

earliest possible. The government should also take all possible and adequate steps to make the service providers in all departments sensitive to the issues pertaining to women. It is incumbent upon the Department of Women and Child Development to take all essential and necessary measures to implement the provisions that are related to “Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005.” Measures must be taken to create adequate awareness in the community with regard to providing proper respect and protection to women. Likewise the law enforcing establishment officers must also be given proper training along with establishing of counseling centers for women who are affected by violence. The microcredit schemes for women and similarly the poverty eradication programs need to be strengthened in great measure for the sake of social and economic empowerment of women. There are many issues that are related to climate change which have telling effects on public health. Issues like water-borne and food-borne infections, thermal extremes and disasters related to weather, food security and malnutrition and depleting the air quality are having serious effect on the health of the people. On the same lines, depleting water tables across the country along with the exhausting of non-renewable sources of energy, deterioration and depletion of water and soil quality, extinction of many species and their innumerable habitats are having disastrous consequences for the human population as a whole. Eight important “national missions” related to various ministries have been identified through the “National Action Plan on Climate Change” through various ministries and efforts are made to understand and mitigate the consequences of climate change. Similarly, focus is made on renewable energy, energy efficiency and conservation of natural resources. In spite of the fact that there are several issues which concern India’s position under UNFCCC, it has been concurred that the per capita Greenhouse gas emissions are not allowed to exceed the average per capita emissions of the developed nations without any compromises on the economic and social development objectives of the country. In coordination with other ministries, the Ministry of Health is providing technical assistance and expertise in implementing emergency preparedness and disaster management measures. In spite of the best efforts of the government, deficiencies still persists. Apart from others, the main pitfalls include lack of rapid assessment of needs, lack of proper health information dissemination, food safety and environmental health after the disaster and ensuring efficiency and transparency in administration of aid to the victims of disasters. For the establishing of institutional mechanisms for disaster management, the implementation of Disaster Management Act, 2005 is highly essential. It helps in ensuring an intersectoral approach for the mitigation of suffering of the victims of disasters and for undertaking holistic, complete coordinated and prompt and rapid response to disaster situations.

Community Participation & Governance

The participation of the community ensures building up public support for programs and policies, generating compliance with regulations and also aids in the ordering of personal health behaviors. One of the important strategic interventions that have been conceived under the NRHM is the system of

ensuring transparency and accountability to the participation of the people-the Rogi Kalyan Samithis. With regard to facilitating community health projects, the Ministry of Health has to come out with a clear and definite policy on the operational methods as well as social participation. The potential areas that can be chosen for the community participation could include lifestyle modification with regard to chronic diseases through diet modification and physical activity, and the primary prevention of alcohol dependence with the help of active community-based techniques like awareness creation among the public and behavioural interventions. Effective identifying and addressing of challenges related to public health resulting new forms of cooperation with private sectors, national health leaders, civil societies and communities, health workers and other relevant international health agencies like UNICEF, WHO, Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, World Bank etc. The enumeration of the families living below the poverty line and other eligible sections that are mired in poverty has to be done in order to make sure that the benefits accruing of Social Security measures reach the targeted sections of the society only. Certain issues related to governance and administration like putting a stop to the pilferage and misuse of government funds, efforts to contain corruption are initiated and thoroughly implemented. Through law enforcement mechanism, speedy redressal mechanism, and the creation of community awareness, the government to take strict action in case of diversion of boots and funds from these social security schemes.

Conclusion

It is highly imperative on the part of both the community and the government to collectively, sustainably and inclusively rise to the occasion and face the formidable and unique challenges that are being thrown at them in relation to the health and well-being of the population as a whole. The social determinants of health and well-being along with the economic determinants should be dealt with a consensus on ethical principles like universalism, dignity, justice, human rights and security. This approach to a great extent will render valuable service to the humanity attaining the dream of ‘Right to Health for all’. The ultimate measurement of success of this policy and perspective is that every Indian from a remote corner in the country and another that lives in metropolitan city experience the same change. There is no dispute regarding the fact that a lot has been achieved in the past. The milestones that were achieved in relation to the public health had a benign impact on the lives of millions of people. Some of the programs like the eradication of Smallpox, Expanded programme of immunization, launch of polio eradication etc are some of the programs to name a few that have really made immense contribution to the public health of the people. The future of the public health in India can be ensured only if the public health agenda is mainstreamed and all citizens of the country are included without an exception in the framework of sustainable development. The ultimate and the cherished goal of any great nation would be that the demarcating line between the rural and urban divide gets completely blurred and all people irrespective of being either urban or rural get access to safe water, clean energy etc which in the process

will ensure the availability of best of health care to all the citizens. This is possible and can be ensured only when the governance is transparent, responsive and corruption free, where illiteracy and poverty have been eradicated and crimes against children or women are completely nullified-a healthy nation that is one of the best places to live in.

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