

Need of improving availability of skilled human resources for strengthening delivery of public health services in India

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Abstract

Provision of quality, affordable health services, closer to the beneficiaries is very important for ensuring good health of the people. India has made tremendous improvement, in last few decades, on most of the health-related indicators. Despite of this progress, several health challenges still remain in the country. India has missed the targets set, under the framework of MDGs, for reduction in maternal and infant mortality. Also, burden of Non-communicable diseases is continuously increasing and India has highest number of people with the diabetes and hypertension problem. The dual burden of diseases is putting enhanced pressure on India's stretched public health system. One of the critical challenge faced in the delivery of public health services in the country, is severe shortage of skilled Human Resources. The delivery of public health services cannot be strengthened without ensuring availability of required skilled HR and this shortage has led to decrease in availability and quality of healthcare services and high inequities in utilization of health services.

Keywords: public health in India, public service delivery, human resources for health

1. Introduction

Public services touch all aspects of life of an individual, society & country. Effective management of public services can lead to prosperity, growth and well-being of an individual, society or country. At the same, poor management of public services can result in socio-economic & development challenges. Public services include different services like education, health, housing, social welfare, transportation etc. Health is a very important public services and its availability & quality has tremendous effect on the well-being of the people.

Provision of quality, affordable health services, closer to the beneficiaries is very important for ensuring good health of the people. Having good health is also very important for overall well-being and development of an individual & society. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also recognized the importance of good health and Goal 3 focuses on good health & well-being. However, improving health status is also required for attainment of other SDGs including eradication of poverty & hunger, quality education, gender equity, reduced inequalities and economic growth. Effective management of health services is quite vital to deliver quality health services and ensure its utilization.

2. Public Health Services in India and Challenges

India has made tremendous improvement, in last few decades, on most of the health-related indicators. The life expectancy has increased to above 67 years while infant and maternal mortality rates are continuously declining along with decrease in prevalence of most of other diseases (Narain, 2016) ^[6]. Several diseases including polio, guinea worm disease and tetanus, have been eradicated from the country. Despite of this progress, several health challenges still remain in the country. India missed the targets set, under the framework of MDGs,

for reduction in maternal and infant mortality. The maternal mortality reduced to 167 in 2011-13 and as per the trend, it was expected to reduce to 140 per 1,00,000 live births by 2015 (Government of India, 2015), but still it was 31 points more than the target of 109 maternal deaths per 1,00,000 live births expected to be achieved by 2015. Similarly, in terms of achievement of target related to under five mortality among children, India was found lacking and under five mortality reduced to 50 per 1000 live births in 2015-16 (NFHS-4, 2015-16) and it was 8 points more than the target of 42 deaths per 1000 live births expected to be achieved by 2015. Also, the IMR reduced to 41 per 1000 live births in 2015-16 (NFHS-4, 2015-16) against the target of 27 per 1000 live births. At the same time, burden of Non-communicable diseases is continuously increasing and India has highest number of people with the diabetes and hypertension problem (World Bank, 2013) ^[10]. The dual burden of diseases is putting enhanced pressure on India's stretched public health system.

The management of public health services in the country is quite a challenging task due to different issues including shortage of infrastructure, financial and human resources, corruption and absenteeism. However, one of the critical challenge faced in the management of public health services in the country, is severe shortage of Human Resources (HR). The management of public health services cannot be strengthened without ensuring availability of required HR and this shortage has led to decrease in availability and quality of healthcare services and high inequities in utilization of health services (Sinha & Sigamani, 2016) ^[9]

As per the rural health statistics (Government of India, 2014) ^[4], 26% positions of doctors in primary health centres were vacant and in community health centres against the requirement of 21,452 specialists (Paediatricians, Physicians, Obstetricians & Gynaecologists and Surgeons), only 4,091

specialists were in-position, hence the gap was as high as 81%. Also, the data from rural health statistics (2014), shows that there is significant variation among the states and the situation is far worse in the tribal (indigenous people) areas. This resulted in lack of quality health care services in many parts of rural India and also in facilities where positions were partially vacant, existing staffs were overburdened which contributed in lowering the quality of services.

3. Reasons for shortage of skilled manpower

The shortage of skilled HR in India is not new and is there from the time of Independence in 1947. However, the problem has become more alarming in last few decades with increasing population, urbanization and increasing burden of diseases. Some of the key reasons for the lack of skilled manpower in the public health sector in India are –

- **Uneven availability of trained HR** - Though around 70% of the country's population live in the rural areas, the availability of trained medical staffs is much higher in urban areas in comparison to rural areas. Doctors in both the public and private sectors are concentrated in urban areas. While the Government has over the period, had made considerable efforts to improve the availability of doctors (and different other health workers) in rural areas, it has not received much success (Bijlwan, 2014) ^[1]. Also, there high inter-state variations, states in northern and central India with poorer health indicators, have fewer doctors in comparison to the southern states, where health indicators are much better, have better availability of doctors (Rao et al, 2012) ^[7].
- **Lack of required financial resources** - One of the key requirement for achieving any policy objective is ensuring availability of required financial resources. Government of India has set the target of increasing government's spending on health, as proportion of GDP, to 2-3%, which is still much lower than expenditures on health by developed countries & some developing countries like Brazil (GoI, 2015). However as per the Economic Survey of India (2012–13), government's spending on health, as proportion of GDP, has only increased from 1.27% to 1.36%, during the period 2007-13. The shortage in funding had negative impact on the programme implementation at all level and hampered the ability of implementers to recruit skilled manpower at the market price.
- **Skewed production of human resources** - The distribution of medical colleges and nursing schools, paramedical institutions is uneven across the states with wide disparities in quality of education. Six southern and western states represent 31% of the Indian population, but have a disproportionately high share of medical college (58%) and nursing colleges (63%) seats in comparison to 8 northern & central India states with much higher population and fewer medical colleges (21%) and nursing colleges (20%) seats (Narain, 2016) ^[6]. The uneven distribution of medical and nursing institutes has led to severe health system imbalances across the states, both in production capacity and in quality of education and training.
- Overall these issues resulted in shortage of skilled HR in the health sector which has severely affected the delivery of public health services in the country especially in rural

areas. Poorer health outcomes in rural areas have also contributed to higher mortalities, gender inequities and lower educational & economic outcomes.

4. Addressing challenge of skilled HR in the public health sector

From our experiences of working in public field, I have observed that following strategies can be adopted to address the shortage of skilled HR in the public health sector and to strengthen the management of public health services –

- **Increasing the fund allocation** – In order to improve the capacity to recruit the qualified HR and strengthen overall availability of health services, it is vital that Government of India's increase the fund allocation towards the health sector. The increased budget can be used for recruiting the qualified staffs, capacity building of new & existing staffs and strengthening referral mechanism.
- **Increasing the production of skilled human resource** – Government need to focus on increasing the capacities of medical colleges and nursing institutes, to improve the availability of skilled human resource at all levels.
- **Strengthening human resource management** – Government need to give increased focus on improving HR management in health sector. Staff's working conditions need to be improved along with enhance in-service training and clear career progression plan. Besides that, incentives can be provided on the basis of performance and also for posting in rural & hard to reach areas.
- **Increasing using of technologies and strengthening referral mechanism**– Use of ICT like tele-medicine can also help in providing quality services to the people in rural areas. Besides that, strengthening the referral mechanism will help in ensuring that for the patients who needed specialized care, same is provided in timely manner.

Implementation of these strategies will help in addressing the challenge of shortage of skilled HR in the health sector in the country.

5. Conclusion

Availability of qualified HR is vital for effective management of public health services. Shortage of qualified HR has resulted in poor delivery and quality of health services especially in rural areas. In order to address the barriers in delivery of quality health services, it is important that availability of skilled HR in health sector in the country is improved. It will contribute in improving health indicators and also other socio-economic development indicators including education, work participation, income, productivity & will contribute in reducing gender inequities, poverty & hunger.

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