

View Point

COVID-19 Pandemic and Need of Strong Public Health

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With the recent pandemic of COVID-19, the importance of preventive measures and public health has again been proved in addressing the scare of emerging infectious diseases. Public health plays a major role in fight against grave dangers to lives of people such as emerging and re-emerging diseases. It can be said that in current scenario of globalization with risk of rapid spread of newer infectious agents such as COVID-19, only strong public health measures can avert further transmission of infection and reduce the morbidity and mortality. As COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic by World Health Organization with no definitive cure till date, preventive approach seems to be the only viable option to reduce the spread. Containment of infection, mitigation and emergency preparedness are main pillars for control of COVID-19 worldwide. With the ongoing processes of epidemiological and demographic transition, newer thorough understanding of public health principles is required to determine the role of changing climate, environment degradation and social determinants so as to frame innovative interventions for health promotion.

Investing in public health would also save the negative impact on the economy. The World Bank estimates the global cost of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome pandemic at 30 billion US dollars. Prediction of losses from COVID-19 to the world economy is beyond imagination if psychological and social suffering is also added to mortality. The enhancement of preventive and health promotion measures would encourage overall public health that directly address the determinants of emerging and re-emerging diseases to avert the consequences. It has been calculated that an yearly investment of US\$ 1.9-3.4 billion to strengthen health systems would yield an estimated global public benefit of over US\$ 30 billion annually, because it would avoid the economic damages associated with such pandemics.

Although provision of basic health facilities is considered a fundamental right of everyone; there are gross inequities in delivery of health services due to geographical factors, vulnerable groups, social and cultural factors and political will. Under such circumstances, only public health has the potential to bridge this gap and provide equal opportunities for health and well being across all races and regions.

Furthermore, as basic principle of public health is prevention of morbidity; it has the potential to drive all the stakeholders viz. government, media, international and local non-profit organizations and community to work towards preventive measures. Additionally, health promotion is also inseparable component of public health which calls upon the simple steps such as cough etiquettes, hand hygiene, use of masks by the sick, etc., for public use. Health promotion interventions lead to decrease in years lost to disability and morbidity among population. Another crucial aspect of public health is its population based approach which focuses on measures relevant for whole population rather than individual which makes it feasible for implementation and more effective. Public health principles are equally effective on non-communicable diseases.

Strong public health in any country ensures that population is aware about the health hazards through a variety of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) campaigns taken by the government, philanthropic and private organizations. Therefore, it is paramount that public health system should be strengthened in India so as to curb the menace of life threatening diseases. More financial support is required for infrastructure up-gradation, recruitment, training of human resource and logistics. Establishment of surveillance systems among human and animals, laboratory testing services, vaccine development, drug trials, outbreak response units, effective communication systems and private sector participation are essential for epidemic preparedness and response. Awareness generation among people using mass and folk media regarding healthy lifestyle, hand washing, prevention of infection, health seeking, identification of dangers signs should be a continuous activity. More public health institutions should be opened to reduce the shortage of skilled manpower and to implement strong public health measures. It is not incorrect to claim that public health empowers people to lead a physically, mentally, socially and economically healthy life. This is the right time for India to enact National Health Bill 2009 so that health rights of each and every individual can be ensured through robust public healthcare delivery system.

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