



Editorial

Early bird catches the worm

The aim of medical education should be to address the healthcare milieu of the society in which it operates. With inadequate research on various aspects of public health problems, the true nature of the problems and ways and means to address them will continue to remain in the realm of speculation. Multipronged practical ways of strengthening research in medical colleges/ institutes (where it is still in its infancy) albeit delayed, need to be carefully planned. The emphasis should be on the problems, which the physicians are likely to face in their career.

The potential for public health research in India is enormous due to its large disease burden. However, public health research output from the country has been grossly inadequate, probably due to inadequate involvement and grooming of the medical students in the area of research. While it is expected that, the medical graduate soon after completing internship will serve the community, act as a leader of the health team and also would identify and solve problems to improve people's health, still, their involvement during their learning phase is not yet emphasized. Recently, there have been some serious efforts at stimulating research interest among the medical students. ICMR in the form of Short Term Studentship (STS) is promoting research atmosphere amongst the medical students. The Union Government is also mobilizing its resources to the under-served states through the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY) by setting up AIIMS-like (or New AIIMS) establishments in order to augment facilities for quality medical education and research in these states.

The current MBBS curriculum has made it obligatory for the undergraduate medical student to engage in field-based academic activities during their internship. This period can be properly utilized by assigning the students the responsibility of carrying out short-term research projects on interesting and pertinent topics related to the health problems prevalent in the field practice areas under the guidance of the faculty. This can also render valuable practical experience to the undergraduates in designing, implementing, analyzing, and writing up research projects.

In order to address this issue, the Dreyfus Health Foundation (DHF), New York, had devised a novel concept called Problem Solving for Better Health (PSBH). Started in 1989, the program has already been implemented in over 30 countries so far. In India, Health Action by People, a Kerala-based non-governmental organization, has been instrumental in implementing the PSBH philosophy among the undergraduate medical students in various medical colleges, mostly in southern Indian states.

Contrary to the traditional presumption that health problems can be solved only through massive national and international efforts, PSBH believes that solutions to most health problems are well within reach, and are often simple and ingenious. It believes that the available limited resources (preventive, therapeutic,

information, talent, and community) are seldom fully utilized, rather they are often wasted. PSBH involves optimizing resource use, prioritizing people's well-being, achieving excellence and a measurable impact at all levels of care, and solving health problems in a broad developmental context.

It was primarily launched with an objective of helping students in medical colleges to have a critical view of the problems and develop approaches towards the prevailing health issues around them. Most often the students themselves are seen to develop a program to either evaluate the issue or even intervene, wherever indicated. Instead of just classroom learning, the students are supposed to identify a common health problem, observed during their visit to the community, identify possible solutions and plan an intervention using sound scientific principles, and then take action in the community setting. They personally undergo a real-life experiential learning process in which they learn how to identify and solve problems (become a problem solver), as well as develop skills to communicate with people and the scientific community.

Learning epidemiology in Indian context is far from expectation, and consequently we are producing a generation of young graduates who are not oriented to public health issues. The knowledge, acquired from textbooks most of which are written by Western authors, is primarily directed towards medical care in developed nations. Therefore the students fail to comprehend and analyze the health problems seen around them.

Inculcating an attitude of research at the learning phase can be a small step yielding greater results towards improving the research output and also improving the health status of the community. In this respect the initiative by the Dreyfus Health Foundation is commendable. Recently few medical universities have taken initiatives to adopt and practice this concept either in toto or in a modified form. It is felt that there is an immediate need for many more medical institutes in our country either to adopt this model by suitably amending it, or develop similar models so as to make the research more practicable and feasible so as to meet the requirements of the local community.

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