

REVIEW ARTICLE

Masters of public health education in India: Current scenario and future prospect

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ABSTRACT

Very limited attention has been directed at the public health workforce and education in India. We undertake this review to get the picture of current situation of public health education in India, with special reference to Masters of Public Health (MPH) program and its future prospects. MPH programs aims to create the competent public health workforces to address the public health challenges of the 21st century. There is a need for institute offering MPH programs to break down the professional silos and promote strategies for collaborations with medical, nursing and other allied professional education institutions. Such inter-professional and trans-professional education will enable to develop competent and efficient health professionals to address multiple public health challenges. Identifying the core competencies is a prelude to curriculum standardization. Under current regulatory frameworks, curriculum standardization across universities would require a dialogue between all stakeholders. To implement the instructional reforms, India needs to give special emphasis on faculty development for delivering the competency based curriculum. Accreditation of public health program in India will ensure high quality academic standards in the education and development of public health practitioners and researchers. It will also develop a system to determine and certify the achievements and maintenance of minimum standards of education in the different occupations and professions in the health system. India needs to have a comprehensive framework that identify positions, create new career opportunities and structured career progression pathway for MPH graduates, that link across discipline in public health. This will ensure efficient public health workforce to combat public health challenges in the post MDG era.

Key words: MPH, Public health education, Public health workforce, Reforms

BACKGROUND

Health is a key for sustainable development. It is an integral part of human wellbeing and it includes various medical and non medical interrelated and interdependent dimensions.⁽¹⁾ Public health approach is required to deal with all determinants of health through multi-sectoral collaboration and inter-disciplinary coordination. Public health seeks to improve human health through the development and application of knowledge that prevents disease, protects the public from harm, and promotes health throughout the state, the nation, and the world. Although India have made great strides in public health education systems over the past several decades, there have been major improvements in public health since 1950s, India is passing through demographic and

environmental transition which is adding to burden of diseases. There is triple burden of diseases, viz. communicable, non-communicable and emerging infectious diseases.⁽²⁾ This high burden of disease, disability and death can only be addressed through an efficient public health workforce.

Globally the public health workforce, even when broadly defined, is deficient both in numbers and competencies, and is poorly linked with the communities served. Much attention has been given to the shortage in the clinical workforce. Limited attention has been directed at the public health workforce. To address this public health workforce quantity and quality issues, institutes or universities offering public health programs or Masters of Public Health programs needs to undertake innovative initiatives to ensure public

health student or MPH graduate that are efficient and competent to address current and future public health challenges.

In India limited work has been done to highlight challenges and future opportunities for public health programs. With this background, we undertake this review to get the picture of current public health education in India, with special reference to MPH program, and its future prospects. The review focuses specifically on the Masters of Public Health (MPH) program as it is currently in evolving phase in India with lots of future prospects.

CURRENT SCENARIO OF PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION IN INDIA

Traditionally, public health education in India was offered through medical schools and national or regional institutes in the form of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral degrees. These courses are open for medical graduates only. India has insufficient number of trained public health personnel and its public health education model, based in medical schools, is inadequate to meet the needs of the country. Over last decade there is a gradual shift in the public health education approach in India, with more institutes offering the Masters of Public Health (MPH) degree, which is open for non medical graduates as well. ^(3,4) As of now 23 institutes offer MPH courses in India with an annual intake capacity of 573. ^(3,5-7)

Currently most of the graduates opting for MPH programs are not medical doctors. With regards to choice for MPH programs, majority enter public health courses on the recommendation of their senior colleagues or in the hope of securing a job in the health sector. Very few take MPH courses by choice having had an opportunity to work in the health sector after graduation, which then motivated them to pursue further studies in public health. ⁽⁵⁾ However, there is a gap between the total seats available and the number of graduates opting for MPH programs. A limited demand of MPH graduates in health sector and lack of awareness regarding career opportunities for MPH graduates is perceived as a significant hurdle for students to take up MPH courses in India. ^(3,5-7)

MPH programs in India are still in evolving as more and more institutes are offering these programs. However, there is an urgent need to strengthen the MPH and other public health programs in India by addressing the gaps discussed below.

POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION IN INDIA

Strengthening health systems through reforms and improving capacities of health workforce can help us address multiple public health challenges. Access to public health education will determine the capabilities of public health professionals to respond to multiple and complex public health problems. ⁽⁸⁾ Currently, India does not have a national strategy, set policy or plan for public health professional education or Masters of Public Health Education or MPH programs. Another issue that needs to be addressed through policy framework is setting of institutes/schools that offer MPH programs. Currently schools offering MPH programs are predominantly in the urban areas. There is no set preference for setting up a public health school in a rural area. Currently very few MPH programs have the compulsory options of field practicum that provide opportunity to graduates to orient themselves to rural and underserved community.

There is a need for institutes offering MPH programs to break down the professional silos and promote strategies for collaborations with medical, nursing and other allied professional education institutions. Such inter-professional and trans-professional education will enable to develop competent and efficient health professional to address multiple public health challenges. ⁽⁹⁾

COMPETENCY BASED CURRICULUM FOR MPH PROGRAMS

No standard curriculum exists for MPH programs in India. Curriculum of MPH program offered in India varies across institutes with regards to core, concentration and cross-cutting discipline areas and course durations/hours. MPH programs in India offered by most of these institutes are generic in nature with emphasis

on core areas of public health. Some of these institutions offer MPH with concentration tracks and some have options for electives as well in specific areas of public health. Furthermore, the competency or learning outcomes are not clearly defined. There is no agreed upon set of skills that a graduate must demonstrate to earn this public health or MPH degree.⁽³⁾

There is an urgent need to outline these core competencies for public health education and training as a part of various public health courses. Lancet commission report on 'Health Professional for 21st Century' recommends adapting competencies to rapidly changing local conditions drawing on global resources.⁽⁹⁾ Identifying the core competencies is a prelude to curriculum standardization. Under current regulatory frameworks, curriculum standardization across universities would require a dialogue between all stakeholders.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND EVALUATION FOR MPH PROGRAMS

In addition to varying curriculum, institutes offering MPH programs in India also have a varying teaching, learning and evaluation strategies. The public health schools use traditional methods of assessment of the competency of the graduates. The evaluation system is variable across institutes and mostly based upon term examinations or semester examinations. The broad areas of assessment cover theory, practicum, internal assessments and project work. Some institutes undertake formative and concurrent evaluations to update upon the daily progress. Dissertation and project work carries a major percentage share of the overall assessment. The students are expected to submit a detailed report at the end of their internships and are assessed on it.

Lancet commission report ⁽⁹⁾ on 'Health Professional for 21st Century' recommends that instructional reforms should adopt competency-driven approaches to instructional design. Institutes offering MPH program in India may implement these recommendation to achieve the key outcome of transformative learning. Transformative learning is about developing leadership attributes and produces enlightened

change agents. It is considered as the highest of three successive levels moving from informative to formative to transformative learning. Informative learning is about acquiring knowledge and skills and it produce experts while formative learning socializes students around values and it produces professionals.⁽⁹⁾ To effectively deliver MPH programs, institutes may exploit the potentials of information technology, strengthen the educational resources. However, to implement the instructional reforms India needs to give special emphasis on faculty development for delivering the competency based curriculum.

ACCREDITATION OF MPH PROGRAMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Accreditation of public health education is measurement of performance of a program in term of inputs, processes and outcomes against a set of nationally recognized, practice-focused and evidenced-based standards. ^(10,11) India, have no apical council or standards for regulation to ensure quality, responsiveness and ethical practice in public health education. In the presence of wide variations in the content and the context of the offered MPH programs, it is essential to ensure program accreditation to achieve and sustain a desired quality of program and to foster a culture of continuous improvement. Accreditation of public health program in India will ensure high quality academic standards in the education and development of public health practitioners and researchers. It will also develop a system to determine and certify the achievement and maintenance of minimum standards of education in the different occupations and professions in the health system. ^(10,11)

However, the primary issue is to identify the bodies or agencies for accreditation the MPH programs. Medical Council and Nursing Council of India has a mandate to regulate that covers only those courses that are offered to medical and nursing graduates respectively. This makes it unlikely for universal accreditation of MPH program that are offered to medical, nursing and non-medical graduates in India. The other issue is to develop a framework for accreditation for

MPH programs on the similar lines of that adopted globally. In 2002, WHO 'Regional Consultation on Development of Accreditation Guidelines for Educational Institutions and Public Health Program' was held at Chennai, India to formulate accreditation guidelines for public health educational programs at different levels. The summary of comprehensive guidelines for accreditation was recommended. These guidelines broadly included mission and objectives of institutes offering courses, curriculum models and instructional models, role of behavioural and social sciences and ethics, role of skills, curriculum structure, composition and duration, faculty position and recruitment, assessment methodology, student support and counselling, physical facility, pedagogy, exchange with other educational institutions, student performances, organizational structure of institute, interaction with health sector and finally continuous renewal accreditation of public health education and institutes. ⁽¹²⁾

CAREER PATHWAY FOR MPH GRADUATES

Currently various opportunities for MPH graduates are either in academia or in the health system, at various levels. These opportunities

are available within the public or government sector, private health sector, not-for-profit organisations or international organisations. The level and type of position depends upon each organisation, its mandate and projects. However, career progression pathway for MPH graduates in India currently are not well defined, more so for the MPH graduates with non-medical background.⁽⁵⁾ India needs to have a comprehensive framework that identify positions, create new career opportunities and structured career progression pathway for MPH graduates that link across discipline/sectors in public health.

CONCLUSION

To strengthen MPH programs require series of institutional and instructional reforms and number of new initiatives like public health education policies, curriculum and approaches for delivering competency based curriculum, system for accreditation and structured career pathways for MPH graduate. This will ensure an efficient public health workforce to combat public health challenges in the post MDG era.

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