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Primary Care: A Mandatory Requirement for Effective Health Care

Waris Qidwai

Primary care is the provision of integrated, accessible healthcare services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal healthcare needs, developing a sustained relationship with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community.¹

A frontline, broad based and holistic approach makes primary care essential for the success and sustainability of any healthcare system. In most circumstances, Family Physicians, Internists, Pediatricians and Obstetricians form the core Primary Care Practitioners. Family Physicians form the main component of the primary care team.

Scandinavian countries have better health indicators in Europe because of strong emphasis given to primary care. South India has better health indicators compared to rest of India, again because of the presence of primary care orientation to health care delivery. Similarly, Sri Lanka has better health indicators in the region because of their strong emphasis on primary care. There is enough evidence to suggest relationship, better health indicators and primary care orientation of health care delivery.²

Ten industrialized countries were compared on the basis of the extent of primary health service, twelve health indicators and population satisfaction with overall costs of the systems. A general concordance was found among these three characteristics, highlighting the importance of primary healthcare, health indicators and the costs of health care.³ In today's, day and age with rising cost of health care, a primary care orientation of health care is the way forward.

The role of primary care in ensuring success of health care delivery is critical for several reasons. The frontline position allows Primary Care Practitioners to offer preventive care and health maintenance initiatives to their patients and diagnose diseases in early stages where they can be successfully handled with minimum and cost effective interventions.

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The community based location of Primary Care Practitioners offer them a unique position to provide care to patients in their context and environment. Patients are known to their practitioners, allowing a better understanding of their symptoms. The trusting relationship exists between a Primary Care Practitioner and patients, allowing better sharing of information and with confidence. The Primary Care Practitioner knows their patient's health seeking behaviour, allowing them to determine appropriate approach for their symptoms evaluation. They also know their patient's family which allows better understanding of home dynamics and its impact on health. The role of family in the health care of individual patient can be exploited to get better health outcomes. The community based location of Primary Care Practitioners allow them to be the main focus for patient care and referrals. The 'gate keeper'⁴ position of Primary Care Practitioner in selecting patients for hospital care referral curtails health care costs.

Primary Care Practitioners are trained in effective communication skills, which allow them to better communicate and understand their patient's problems. Practice of effective communication skills is known to improve patient's satisfaction with the clinician.⁵ These skills allow Primary Care Practitioner to form the focus for effective communications between patient and the health care team, supporting other members of the team in delivery of this challenging task.

Primary Care Practitioners practice holistic medicine, allowing them to effectively handle multiple patient problems at the same time. The bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model of medical practice allow them to tackle patient complaints at multiple levels. This provides value to them in the health care delivery by providing cost effective care in a convenient manner and leads to enhanced patient's satisfaction.

The super-specialization of medicine, as a result of information explosion, is resulting in fragmentation of medical care. Patients are seen separately for various problems by different consultants.⁶ It is the Primary Care Practitioner that can help put the fragments back together, working in close liaison with other Health Care Providers.

The humanistic aspect of patient-doctor-consultation is being overshadowed by advances in technology and their application in medical practice.⁷ A model of medical practice where a patient is looked at as a living human

being and not a chamber housing a heart, brain and a gut requires emphasis. Advances in technology seem to undermine this approach, where a Physician looks at the heart of a patient and does not consider enough that it is housed in living human being with feelings and aspirations requiring evaluation of psycho-social issues. The value of specialist is no less nor more important than Primary Care Practitioner but is only when primary, secondary and tertiary level practitioners work in harmony, are in a symbiotic relationship with each other and patient focused that the health care delivery system can realize its full potential.

The future holds tremendous challenges for delivery of health care. The rising costs of living in general and of health care⁸ in particular are likely to lead to scarce resources for medical care. Public spending on health care is likely to reduce, leading to increase out of pocket expenditure for patients. Medical insurance and non-governmental organizations will play a much larger role in health care. Advances in technology are likely to lead rationing of medical services and their application will make patients present with more advance complications, putting more pressure on already scarce resources. Hospital services are increasingly moving into the community and putting more pressure on Primary Care Practitioners. Ageing population⁹ is likely to put more pressure on health care delivery since elderly patients have multiple morbidities and require special care. Newer generation practitioners work fewer hours, aggravating physician shortages, particularly in rural areas.¹⁰ The advances in information technology mean that patients tomorrow will be more knowledgeable and, therefore, more challenging to satisfy.

It is through a strong primary care and primary health care in health care delivery that future challenges of providing effective and cost effective health care to the masses will be ensured. The time has come that we give proper place to primary care in the health care system.

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