

Public Health in India: Governance and Managerial Challenges

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Changes in the structures and governance arrangements of our health system bring many new challenges. NRHM promotes decentralized decision making, encourages integration between health and related sectors, and emphasizes continuous monitoring of health programs. The private health care sector is growing rapidly over the last decade without a well defined regulatory framework while the public sector is adopting revenue generating measures such as “user fees” for cost recovery. The government is also promoting public private partnerships for augmenting the resources in delivering services. Even though Government initiatives in public health have recorded some noteworthy successes over time, our achievements in health outcomes are only moderate by international standards. The paper presents evidences of inadequate governance and management of the health administrations, and suggests ways forward to overcome the problems.

Management is all about efficient and effective utilization of resources, as per governance norms, to deliver products and/or services to meet the client needs. Management of the health sector therefore calls for managing its resources, namely, finances, human resources, drugs, and medical equipment, so as to deliver good quality health services that are available, accessible, affordable and equitable. Management functions include (i) strategic planning for resource allocation to achieve policy goals, (ii) design and supervision of project implementation, and (iii) monitoring and control to ensure the desired results. Effective and efficient utilization of resources requires an understanding of the input resources required to achieve specific targets. Resource requirements vary from district to district, as well as between urban and rural areas. However, such resource planning is not reflected in the RCH and NACP documents.

Governance processes- stewardship and regulation in particular, should be strengthened and an evidence based policy process should be encouraged. Management capacity should be augmented to develop a strategic plan to achieve policy goals, and to undertake a continuous monitoring with appropriate interventions when necessary in the implementation of the strategic plan.

Our government’s spending on Health at 1% of the GDP accounts for only 20 % of the country’s total healthcare expenditure. A significant portion of government’s spending on health is utilized for meeting the fixed and overhead expenditure, leaving very little money for variable expenditure.

It is equally important to augment the management capacity to overcome the non-financial barriers in delivering good quality services. For example, there is an urgent need to strengthen the logistics management of drug distribution. Many PHCs and CHCs

continue to experience frequent stock-outs of essential drugs, and equipment remains unutilized for want of proper maintenance or skilled technicians.

Human Resources management in the health sector is very weak. The lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of health personnel lead to difficulties in establishing proper accountability for service delivery. Many senior officials in the Health administration hold multiple additional charges, making it impossible to do justice to the posts they hold. Frequent transfer of officials and migration of health personnel to the private sector and lucrative jobs abroad have serious consequences on the health system.

Health Information System is incomplete since it captures only data from the public health facilities which caters to an estimated 20 % of the population. Also, most of the data it contains is not properly validated. Birth and death registration is incomplete and compilation of morbidity and mortality data is inadequate.

The management of our health system has been mostly “supply pushed” than “demand driven”. Public should be perceived no longer as passive receivers of medical care, but as active participants in the process of health improvement. Civil Society has an important role in improving the public health standards.