

## EDITORIAL

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### Challenges in Advancing Public Health

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The deadly infectious diseases and the growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases are increasingly challenging the health of the population in developing countries; a two-edge sword killing millions of people. Many of the deaths are occurring among the young and productive segment of the population; and many of the diseases are preventable with timely and appropriate interventions.

Many initiatives have been put on the public health agenda without much success in the last two-three decades in an effort to change the tragic situations in developing countries. Many targets were set but many passed without being achieved particularly in the subSaharan Africa. There are many reasons for the failures in advancing public health in this part of the world; lack of strong public health leadership, weak integration of science, and inadequate human resource are among the major problems. These and other factors remarkably compromised the quality of health services, which are also often inaccessible to the large segment of the population.

Public health targets are often very difficult to achieve quickly. Interventions must be sustained without interruption for sufficient period to be effective. This implies that adequately trained and committed public health leaders need to be in place at all levels of the health system. Frequent turnovers must be minimized in order to fully benefit from investments made in staff and institutional capacity building. Incentive and support mechanisms need to be in place for highly effective professionals. The public health system also needs to develop mechanisms for timely identification of weaknesses and take corrective actions.

Public health interventions and programs must have strong basis in science and the leadership must inculcate this notion through the system. Today, advances in health sciences provide numerous tools and models for

planning, implementing and evaluating health interventions. It is more imperative for poor countries to utilize those tools and models since they can not afford wasting resources on interventions that are not productive.

Information available locally must be maximally utilized in every effort to improve the public health. Community based research sites in the country need to be functionally integrated to the health services system to be very useful. They can collectively provide platform for testing and evaluating interventions, and offer scientific basis for improving interventions adapted from elsewhere. Public health training institutions need to be engaged more seriously in improving the health services. Flexible and adaptable curricula must be negotiated to ensure timely support for in-service training needs, and for long-term human resource development endeavors.

The successes in providing polio and measles vaccines to almost all children nationwide in mass campaigns demonstrate that the public is willing to accept health interventions if they are provided conveniently. Willingness to accept services is not necessarily based on the full understanding of the nature of the interventions. Thus, to move the public health agenda forward and prevent thousands of premature deaths in the nation efforts must be strengthened in putting together health packages that can be easily accessed by large number of people, and in having visionary leadership capable of engaging multiple partners, and the public at large, efficiently at all levels. Addressing the challenges in meeting our public health targets need to be taken seriously and with full commitment to ensure a better and healthier life for the people.

The public health leadership including those in government agencies, non-governmental organizations and professional associations must be more open and proactive in creating functional network of public health systems in order to prevent avoidable sufferings and to save generations.

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