Beyond COVID-19: Challenges to Primary Healthcare and Preparedness in Pakistan

A health system consists of a healthcare delivery infrastructure, pharmaceutical industry, medical devices’ industry, and medical technology, whereas the remaining 50% includes support by the non-health sector consisting of food and nutrition, water and sanitation, academia, financial, planning, population, infrastructure and legal departments. Given the all-inclusive and integrated nature of such a system, Pakistan’s healthcare system has never been built for a comprehensive response to its people.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused several challenges to healthcare systems globally, but in developing countries, like Pakistan, the magnitude of its damage has been multipronged, which adversely affected health severity, caused economic losses, and increased malnourishment and vulnerability of women (especially pregnant ones). On the one hand, Pakistan has one of the most comprehensive national database systems in the world, whereas on the other hand, she stands among those few nations which has never been able to prepare any contingency plan for a national-level health emergency. In fact, no efforts have ever been made by the national health policymakers to revamp the health system in accordance with contemporary requirements.

According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan (2018-19), ‘the number of registered doctors and nurses is 22,595 and 108,474, respectively. The number of patients per doctor is 963 and the population per hospital bed is 1608. Pakistan spends only 3.29% of its GDP on the healthcare system, whereas smaller countries (like Nepal) spend almost 6% of their GDP on health.’ Hence, one of the most vulnerable segments during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the health staff which became vulnerable to the non-availability of proper kits, gadgets, and essential medicines. This led to a substantial number of deaths of health service providers. The pandemic also exposed the gaps and lacunas of government machinery and the weak support of line departments to the healthcare delivery system. There is no single department which has been prepared or equipped to deal with an emergency or pandemic. The situation in Pakistan is getting alarming, as the healthcare system is overburdened with increase in COVID-19 patients mainly because of lack of PPEs, testing kits, insufficient funds disbursement and lack of required equipment.

There is a need to thoroughly review the health policy of Pakistan and revamp the healthcare delivery system keeping in mind the new paradigm post-COVID-19. This includes a comprehensive review of all other policies from four aspects: 1) activities to promote healthcare; 2) protection of healthy population; 3) restoration of health; and 4) maintaining good health. For this purpose, there is a need to take care of non-medical needs as well and equitable health financing without discrimination towards any segment of society. Serious efforts are also needed to make a comprehensive health preparedness plan for not only primary healthcare, but also secondary and tertiary healthcare systems. All line departments need to be actively engaged to build back a better Pakistan to achieve sustainable health and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This panel would, therefore, focus on Pakistan’s healthcare delivery system in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s preparedness to cope with primary healthcare delivery to citizens.

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