

POLICY BRIEF

Reclaiming India's Public health:

A Policy Framework to champion
India's Healthcare Trajectory



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ARRIVAL OF A GOLDEN AGE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

With a pandemic like COVID-19, the golden age for public health has arrived. I have told this before, but I would like to tell it again, Public health is the sexiest profession of the 21st century. The destiny of a country like India rests on the shoulders of an efficient public health system driven by passion and conviction that is critical to shaping critical public health structures and systems.

It was evident that someday medicine has to become a science which worked to prevent diseases than to treat them alone, this day has arrived. 2020 is the year which should change the way medicine is seen, viewed and approached. The entire world is obligated to take interest in preventive healthcare and public health. We as healthcare providers are entrusted to heal the world and organize public health in the most magnificent way possible.

Remember always, the pride of serving our country and her people is more important than mere income, the gratitude of people who go back from the doors they enter the hospital is much more permanent than anything else. Let us recognise that, people in communities and patients in hospital have been our greatest source of wisdom and learning, and we also have a moral obligation to give back to those very people from whom we learn.

If this effort must not be forgotten after the pandemic gets controlled, then we must do more than just treat patients, we must volunteer, we must mainstream the agenda of healthcare, we must raise our voice in solidarity, not with political leanings, but by pushing governments to act responsibly, always and forever. Our aspirations on earth are common, our future certain. In the interest of humanity, our generation must see the world liberated and we must achieve affordable and universal health coverage in our lifetime. The saga of coronavirus has mainstreamed the importance of global public health like never before in the history of human kind. For the first time in our lifetime, we can understand what is freedom yet not being entirely free to roam around, unwind with colleagues over pep talks, do the regular shopping or the fun time or go to religious places of workshop whatever we conceive God to be. For the first time have we seen so many industrial sectors being affected, countries going into lockdowns and the global village in search of meaning and existence. Those sectors which felt that healthcare was a by-product and community health can be a taken for granted entity, the virus has led the way to tickle the human ego and have a straight talk on why investing in public health matters.

We have seen plenty of conversations filled with cold statistics where human life has been absent. We have also witnessed mathematical modelling and predictions which have only served to remain at best in dustbins of history. What saved and safeguarded the planet was critical measures put in place to invest in public health systems, to make it safer, to retrofit policies that can address cascading risks to separate public health from political goals. India's population stands at over 1.3 billion. Our human resource in healthcare is grossly inadequate to address this billion beats nation. But we have been over the years been nurturing public

health professionals whose energies could be rightly channelled and shaped.

India faces a triple burden of diseases which emerge from infectious disease, non communicable diseases, emerging and re-emerging infections. This burden is compounded by cascading risk from extreme weather events, road traffic accidents, severe human resource constraints and poorly invested hospital care. The growth and progress of the health sector is important to support long term trade, sustainable livelihood, boost public healthcare and protect vulnerable groups across the length & breadth of the country. I suggest in broad strokes the method possible to reclaim India's public health.

SUSTAINABLE HUMAN LIFE THRIVES ONLY WITH STRONG HEALTH SYSTEMS

There is no point treating a patient without removing the factors that make them sick in the first place. Human life is nothing without effective primary care and tertiary care. The focus of our era must be towards building strong health systems so that future generations may be grateful because we lived. The coronavirus pandemic is our moment to mainstream healthcare around the world, make it a diplomatic priority, enkindle a new spirit of pro-health, of responsibility, of service where we force Governments to resolve to invest more, work harder to not just build communities, but also build healthcare workers, ensure their safety and create world class public hospitals in spite of limitations. This is not a project of a decade, but a mission of a lifetime, which if we start now, coming generations will be grateful because we lived. Imagine, how beautiful it would be to witness a new generation of planetary health rise to heights of greatness and splendour, of safety and security, filled with hope and not heartache. Healthcare must no longer

be an ideal inspired by any one leader, one nation, one agency or any one Non-Government Organization. The future of healthcare must be defined by a moral collective of stakeholders as diverse as can be and as small or big as can be, provided they have the mind and heart and willingness to work hard.

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF INDIA'S COMMUNITY HEALTH PHYSICIANS AND PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS.

This is a perfect storm which sets the tone of practical activism over theoretical rhetoric and arm-chair research. It pushes every community health physician to contribute their bit by raising legitimate information in the age of misinformation. To actively work in case finding, outbreak investigation and meticulous surveillance and to win the hide and seek war. To build community resilience, if I may say as an ambitious goal.

Every year around 800 plus MD Community Medicine Physicians pass out from the country. If all these 800 professionals were posted in district health offices as programme planners for the Government to work closely with the district administration and NGOs, the reality today will be different. Nevertheless, what can be done is to depute all 800 MD Community Medicine professionals to work in 1 district headquarters and taluks for 6 months compulsory with a report prepared on the progress in the district.

Likewise, all Public Health professionals doing MPH must be mandatorily given the task to improve records and quality control in all health offices, besides train health officials on research methods and how to work towards evidence based public health.

CULTIVATING ETHICAL CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) IN REDUCING DISEASE BURDEN AND CASCADING RISKS

Investment inefficiency and investment insufficiency have been major bottlenecks in implementing strong social responsibility in India. India Inc has the bandwidth, the budget and the zeal to champion developmental priorities, but at times, the energies get lost in purposeless pursuit. The corporate goal of social responsibility must be to directly work with grassroot implementing partners and see development in action. But at times, corporate firms are mis-guided to form their own outfit and build the space. It must be recognized that forming an outfit and building the space is very different from working with those whose calling lies in development.

You cannot champion development only by having monetary might, if the calling and purpose is missing. Neither can calling and purpose be purchased for a price. India Inc must understand that business must be their core goals which singularly drives our nation ahead, besides creating jobs, for which the entire country is grateful. The social impact component must be left in the hands of the social sector and grass-root drivers and enablers of care with accountability factored in. That is how ethical CSR will lead to transformational growth in nation building.

A Covid19 world must not merely focus on businesses alone, but now needs to integrate business development and social impact together. Have you ever imagined, how gratifying it would be to run a mobile hospital in your region? or perhaps build a community hospital where mainstream hospitals do not want to enter or work and have sustainability demanded by implementing agencies?

Touching the souls of human who are often excluded from the idea of growth and often excluded by cash cows is a different feeling. A feeling that cannot be put into words, but only remembered in the remembering. Balancing science, commerce and social responsibility calls for a vision. A vision that cannot easily be obtained by merely putting money for publicity. That vision needs to be nurtured, shaped and hand-held for a time to see results. Visionary leaders must also learn to spend their corporate social responsibility budget more effectively rather than merely donating it to any treasury and feeling satisfied to have contributed. Accountability and effectiveness is as important as having lunch or dinner on a normal day.

A post covid19 world calls for greater activism, deeper engagement on ground and lesser optics. The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you may not sit, but at least live to see.

BRIDGING THE PUBLIC HEALTHCARE GAP

The widening gap is not going in India's favor with the gulf between those who have and those who have not increasing. The gaps need to be urgently bridged by following ways:

- Improving infrastructure at Government hospitals and enhancing bed capacities.
- Timely clearance of payment and dues to hospitals and going digital to bypass mid-level systems & red-tapism.
- Creating a dedicated Ministry of Public Health at all state levels and at the central level.
- Working with NGOs closely and funding them under various schemes.
- Making global health diplomacy a ministerial priority.

- Bringing back Indian Medical Services
- Ensuring faster and effective policy decisions on preventable diseases and deaths.

INDIA'S CENTURY AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL SOUTH

With a rapidly rising economy, an ecosystem that supports ethical commerce and social impact and a billion beats spirit, this century along with many many more to come is arguably India's moment. The future of the global south will depend heavily on India. While we guide missiles, we cannot misguide men and women, while we boost medical tourism, we cannot leave our vulnerable groups behind. While we champion development for others, we cannot forget our own. The dual burden of helping others and helping our own falls back heavily on our shoulders. But as a resilient nation built on strong foundations of brotherhood, fraternity, solidarity and care, it is certain that we will emerge stronger than ever before, provided we work honestly to the task at hand. Our nation was built on the dream of a free India, and with decades of Independence, behind us, that dream has seen the light of day, everyday. As we focus on education, on defense, on development and on bilateral co-operation with regional co-operation, we must ensure that our health systems evolve, that we build an ecosystem that thrives not just for health, but importantly for sustainable happiness. We will get there, for now, we must get to work. Long live our Republic. Jai Hind.



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