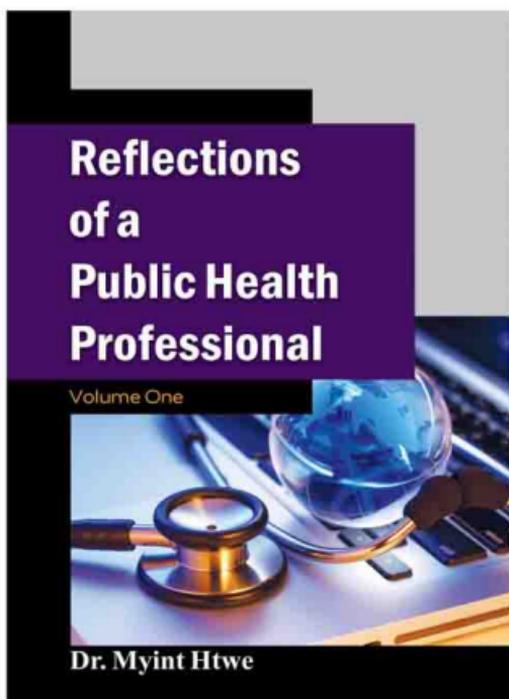


Genuine Power of Public Health



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1. Genuine power of public health

Public health activities have been initiated for several decades even before the American bacteriologist and public health expert Professor C.E.A. Winslow in 1920 coined the definition of public health. Generally, people do not realize the benefit of the work of public health professionals and that, in fact, the overall health status of the population is maintained by good public health interventions. For many years, people have generally connoted public health as “environmental sanitation works and health education activities”. This notion was widespread even during our medical student days in the early sixties.

People appreciate and are thankful to clinicians or general practitioners who treat them and help them to get well. This is understandable because people see the immediate outcome of services rendered by clinicians or general practitioners. *Public health professionals are always at the backstage and people do not realize the genuine and enormous power that public health professionals (epidemiologists to programme managers to basic health service workers) can exert in promoting population health in the country.*

The scenarios cited below depict the genuine power of public health. Public health professionals carry out preventive and control activities for dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever in a township or state or region as their routine duties. Because of that, hundreds if not thousands of children and adults will not suffer from dengue or dengue haemorrhagic fever, leave alone untoward socio-economic consequences and psychological suffering of the population at large. However, the situation just passed by without any noticeable effect or appreciation.

Public health professionals give *health education talks at schools, factories and other workplaces*. School children and factory workers, both blue-collar and white-collar workers, attend and the event is concluded. Similarly, the event just passed by without any noticeable effect.

Reflections of a Public Health Professional

Nobody realizes the fact that the recipient population's knowledge horizon was broadened and knowledge base enhanced. A certain proportion of recipient population may have changed their risk behaviour, eating habits, sleeping habits, exercise taking habits, social habits, and even sexual habits. This could result in many short-term as well as long-term benefits not only to them but also to the peer groups or population or family members.

Public health professionals *do urgent preventive and control measures to tackle an outbreak of any disease or condition* as soon as they get the hint or news. It is not an easy task. Detailed planning of outbreak control measures, round-the-clock monitoring of the situation, quick and effective networking, efficient reporting and communication, proper resources (man, money, material and time) coordination and mobilization, issuing instant directives or orders to frontline health workers, continuous or round-the-clock laboratory work, serious brainstorming of epidemiologists and relevant professionals of concerned ministries, conforming to International Health Regulations (2005), etc. have to be performed. Several collaborative initiatives among public health professionals ranging from community-based health workforce to the Minister of Health take place. It is like - *planning to win a war.*

The outbreak is controlled and is over. However, the event just passed by without being noticed significantly by the population at large. The team of public health professionals may sometimes get a pat on the back by higher authorities. The public is not aware of the fact that we, public health professionals, have *successfully prevented the suffering of hundreds if not thousands of people due to that particular disease* in the population at large.

The government saved millions of kyats that would have to be spent for treating that specific disease causing an outbreak. The increase in hospital workload had not occurred as the outbreak was controlled in time. Therefore, more time and more care can be given for managing hospitalized patients suffering from other diseases. Several deaths in the population and long-term sequelae may have been prevented from an outbreak of diseases such as Japanese encephalitis or bacterial or viral encephalitis.

One of the flagship programmes of public health is immunization, which is run by public health professionals. To implement immunization activities successfully, public health professionals have to consider various perspectives such as issues on logistics, efficient programme management, administration, human resource management, cold chain system maintenance, monitor vaccine effectiveness, budget handling and allocation, coordination with local authorities, dealing with funding agencies and development partners, monitor adverse reaction following immunization, registering and recording, acceptance of the community, detailed programme planning, etc. Following this, immunization activities for vaccine-preventable diseases are fielded all over the country and successfully completed for a particular round of immunization.

- (i) *Does the population at large realize that millions of children will not be suffering from several childhood infectious diseases because of the immunization programme?*
- (ii) *Can we imagine a scenario in a country where immunization activities are not running properly?*

Definitely, there will be several outbreaks of infectious diseases in various parts of the country. What a chaotic situation we would be facing as well as disruption of normal life pattern, socioeconomic disturbances and psychological suffering of the population at large! Here, one can vividly notice the consequential role of public health professionals.

Public health professionals are also managing preventive and control interventions for communicable and noncommunicable diseases and conditions. The benefits for the population, both in short-term and long-term perspectives, are enormous. The amount of money that could be saved by the government because of reduction of disease burden in the country is huge. *Has the population realized the importance of public health professionals?*

Conclusion

All the citations alluded to earlier reinforce the fact that services of public health professionals are the *sine qua non* in order to improve population health effectively in any country. It also connotes that clinicians are dealing at the individual level whereas public health professionals are dealing at the population level. *An ounce of preventive work by public health professionals is worth several pounds of benefit.* Let us applaud loudly the sincere services of committed public health professionals, especially the basic health service workers and community-based health workforce (community health workers). *In essence, it is only through promoting the public health domain that we can achieve our goal of “healthy population in the country”.*

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