

Making health system work

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This title is borrowed from a WHO series of working papers focusing on some important issues pertinent to health system development. The WHO and many other organizations and authorities have initiated discussions and work signaling the importance of health system to the delivery of health care and population health.

A health system is defined as the sum total of all the organizations, institutions and resources whose primary purpose is to improve health ⁽¹⁾. National health systems usually include public, private, traditional and informed sectors. Four essentials functions for a health system have been defined including stewardship, financing, resource generation and service provision ⁽²⁾.

Strengthening health systems and making them more equitable have been recognized as key strategies for improving population health, fighting poverty and fostering development.

Problems with the health systems are globally recognized and they are not confined to poor countries. All nations, rich and poor have varying degrees of shortcomings within the machineries of their health systems. These problems vary to include aspects of coverage, access, equity, affordability and quality of health care. In developing countries severely hit by adverse economic and political situations, health systems have come near to collapse due to factors such as lack of resources, shortage of health workforce and poor governance.

Developed countries, however, are not exempt from major health system problems. In a country like the USA, where the annual health spending mounts to US\$ 2.1 trillion, the health system is described to

be ailing and in need of cure ⁽³⁾. The fact that USA lags behind many other developed nations for health indicators despite this huge spending on health, denotes clearly that money alone can not guarantee a well functioning health system.

The world Health Report 2000 has been described as a land-mark publication on health system development. The report defines concepts, boundaries, goals and functions for a national health system. The broad definition of a health system introduced by the report and its attempts to measure performance of health systems has evoked a never-ending debate on health systems ⁽⁴⁾. While the broad nature and comprehensive approach proposed to health systems were seen as vague and discouraging focused interventions, the isolated attempts targeting single domains were also proven to be ineffective in improving health systems performance.

It would then be clearly appreciated that “making health systems work” is a challenging endeavor. Lesson from different reforms demonstrate that there is no shortcut to improving health care without paying attention to the health system as a whole. Lessons have also shown that health system development is not a one-off process. Reforms should be ongoing and context-based and should benefit from research to document what works and to enable sharing of experience.

Reference

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