

1. Health Research in Medical Colleges

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Like many developing countries, Nepal continues to suffer from triple burden of diseases- the persistence of communicable diseases, the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases and continued threat of emerging and re-emerging diseases. Medical colleges have a social responsibility to contribute towards improvement in health status of the people by fostering appropriate health research in the major health problems of the society. It is also important to develop innovative, cost effective and socially acceptable solutions to these problems through research.

The Medical colleges/schools as centres of excellence of learning can contribute significantly towards promotion of health research. Health research is important in generation of new knowledge, validation of existing information and application of the existing and new knowledge for improving patient care and improving public health. Medical schools have all the prerequisites required to promote research- the academic faculty, the laboratories, the patients and the community they serve. Thus the medical schools should be able to promote basic scientific research through the biomedical laboratories, clinical research through clinical departments and public health research in the community they serve. One might ask then, with all the prerequisites available why research is not being taken up seriously by medical schools.

Lack of fund, incentives and enabling environment for research are cited by faculties as reasons for the research not being taken up in the medical colleges/schools. However analysis reveals that lack of a clear cut research policy and lack of research culture are major factors. Lack of research culture may be due to short history of medical education in the country, the first medical school was established only twenty five years ago and late start of the Nepal Health Research Council , which was started only in 1991.

While agreeing to the fact that the above factors may have been operative in the past we must also agree that there have been positive developments in the last ten years. The number of medical colleges has increased to ten and all medical colleges have all the prerequisites to promote health research – the faculties, the laboratories, heavy clinical load of

patients and multitude of public health problems of the community to solve.

The establishment of Nepal Health Research Council as an apical body for health research has been another very positive development to promote health research in the country. Nepal Health Research Council has been training faculties from different medical schools in research methods in order to create a critical mass of research scientists and has also been advising medical schools to start Research committees in the respective medical schools as the very first step to start the process of research promotion

Taking into consideration the constraints that need to be rectified and the positive developments that have occurred, what are the steps that the medical schools should take to promote health research in their respective schools? The important steps to be taken should include the following:

1. A clearly spelt out Research Policy is the most important step. Strategies and programme on research will depend on and follow clear enunciation of the policy. The Vice-Chancellor of the University/Dean/Principal of medical college has an important responsibility to enunciate the research policy.
2. Setting up the research committee would be the next logical step. A multidisciplinary committee with representation from all stakeholders should be set up. The committee should meet regularly, deliberate on how to promote research and make appropriate recommendations to promote health research.
3. Allocation of funds for research is absolutely essential. It goes without saying that policy commitment without commitment for appropriate funds will lead to nowhere. Expenses incurred for research promotion should be viewed as an investment in health and not as expenditure as this will lead to improvement in quality of services and cost containment in the long term. Global Forum for health Research has estimated that each dollar spent in health will lead to saving of ten dollars in the long run. To start the process the medical colleges/schools should commit certain percentage of its

operating budget for research. This fund is required to organize training in research, procurement of books and journals in health research and to provide grants to faculties and students to get research started. Other sources of funding should be sought subsequently. As the faculties get more experienced and are able to write good grant proposals additional resources will come.

4. Training of faculties in research methods would be another important step to get research started. It is necessary to create a critical mass of trained research scientists consisting of clinicians epidemiologists, biostatisticians, social scientists and others depending on the need of institutions
5. Creation of enabling environment is essential to foster health research. Research can flourish only in an environment where access to scientific material is easily available, the laboratories are reliable and research is encouraged, recognized and rewarded. This environment needs to be created and supported. Access to electronic version of full text of otherwise expensive journals through HINARI offered by WHO to developing countries and other means are some of the mechanisms for enhancing the enabling environment. Medical schools should have such facilities as prerequisites for promoting research as well as to provide evidence based data and information for providing good quality care and teaching
6. Appropriate incentive and career path need to be created. This is necessary to retain research scientists in the institution and to increase their productivity. Research should be made an essential prerequisite for career promotion. It is important to emphasize that research should be an essential part of the job of the faculties in the medical schools in addition to their role as a teacher or a clinician. This will enhance competition among faculties, promote research

culture, improve quality of care of patients and lead to excellence in academic medicine. Research work should be made compulsory in specialist training programmes along the lines suggested in Calman report for certificate of completion of specialist training [CSST] of United Kingdom. The aim is to prepare the faculties to manage not only the current health problems but also to enable them to address the future health challenges.

It is certain that the medical colleges/schools that organize research will be able to attract better faculties, more funding, provide better services and attain greater heights in academic medicine and enhance the reputation of their medical institutions than those who do not. It is time the Medical Colleges wake up to these challenges and takes up health research seriously.

References

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