

WHY MORE MEDICAL COLLEGES IN PUBLIC SECTOR?

Progress is human nature and the need of every society. Education in general and enhancement of skilled work force in particular play an important role in the development and progress of the society. To keep pace with nations, societies and cultures on the global stage, Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations would plan, as a team, to meet the current and future requirements. It gives pleasure to see the progress being made in general education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. We had 08 universities in 60 years history of Pakistan but in the last four and a half years, 09 more universities have been established in our province. It is expected that the current literacy rate of 49.9% would shoot up in the next 5-10 years. Although this is a welcome expectation, higher literacy rate alone would not improve the health indicators.

Literacy rate and skilled work force in health are essential factors for the improvement of health indicators. Enhancing one and ignoring the other would not help to meet our national, regional and international obligations. When literacy rate is low, people will not be able to use available health care facilities optimally hence the desired improvement in health indicators would remain a dream even in the presence of adequate appropriately qualified health care providers. On the other hand, high literacy rate would create demand for accessibility of quality health care services to masses. If this awareness is not met with expected services through enhancement in skilled work force in health sector, frustration and dissatisfaction would grow further with health indicators remaining low. Take the example of India. Health indicators in India are much lower than Sri Lanka despite its financial might. It is because of the low literacy rate. On the other hand, the literacy rate in Sri Lanka is much higher and it is coupled with enhancement of skilled work force in health sector. The result is that health indicators of Sri Lanka are enviably higher despite its tiny economy and internal armed conflict. Thus, if we want to improve our health indicators and be known on the world stage, we have to improve literacy rate together with improvement in quality and numbers of health care providers.

A medical college should not be seen as a machine producing doctors and elite of the society. A doctor creates demand for Nurses, Paramedics and other support staff. Thus a medical college not only produces doctors but creates direct jobs for the support staff required for running a health care facility to meet local needs and international obligations. Production of skilled work force will help us ensure our due share in the regional and international market

and earning foreign exchange; helping stable foreign exchange reserves of the country.

Due to the demands of market forces, Medicine is the most sought after profession in the world and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is no exception. Every year, thousands of bright students who pass their F.Sc examination in First Division desire to join medical colleges but are unable to get admission due to limited opportunities. Hundreds of young students go abroad (mostly to Russia, China, Afghanistan, Cuba, Central Asian states etc) for medical education, costing huge sums of foreign exchange to the families and to the government. The irony is that most of these foreign institutions and their degrees are not recognized by Pakistan Medical and Dental Council and the returning graduates have to undergo further convoluted and time consuming expensive processes to get their degrees registered. It is further stated that graduates from Russia, China, Afghanistan, Cuba and Central Asian states with their low quality skills would over-investigate and overprescribe the patients. This would lead to higher tangible and nontangible cost with higher mortality and morbidity (Fig. 1). Therefore to fulfill the demand of the public and to overcome the shortage of doctors in the province and to save the valuable foreign exchange, there is a need and scope for establishment of more medical colleges at appropriate and feasible locations. Thus, a medical college not only helps the locals to receive health care at a reduced cost; it is an instrument of saving foreign exchange for the country.

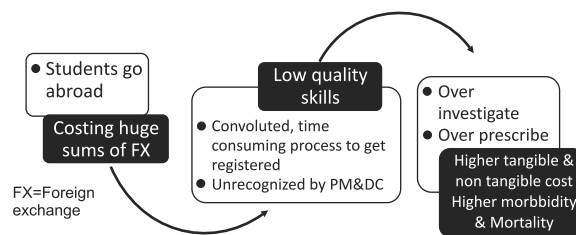


Fig. 1

Incidentally (and unfortunately), private medical colleges have mushroomed taking advantage of the situation and are fleecing students and their parents, despite a total disregard for the quality and future of the would-be medical graduates and the services they are supposed to render. Most of the hard working, intelligent students of middle class in the social strata do not see their dream of becoming doctor come true because they cannot afford to get admitted in private medical schools and public sector medical colleges have no capacity to absorb them.

Presently, there are eight medical colleges in six districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa namely; Khyber Medical College, Peshawar, Khyber Girls Medical College, Peshawar, Khyber College of Dentistry, Peshawar, Bacha Khan Medical College, Mardan, Saidu Medical College, Saidu Sharif, Swat, Gomal Medical College, D.I Khan, Ayub Medical College, Abbottabad, and Bannu Medical College, Bannu. All together, around 1000 graduates leave these institutions each year. Most of these graduates (Fig. 2) either opt for post graduation or get into private sector or go abroad (job opportunities or post graduation). The net result is that most of these graduates are not available to serve in the public sector institutions. In the circumstances, we would have no choice but to employ doctors trained from abroad with low quality skills as alluded to in this editorial. If we want to avoid this, we need to plan opening new medical colleges in public sector now.

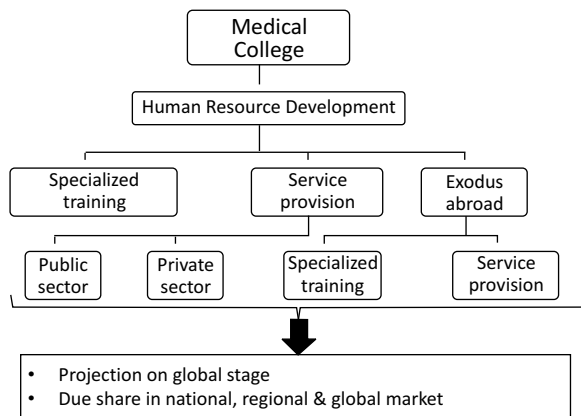


Fig. 2

The establishment of a medical college not only brings medical education and high quality healthcare to people of the area, but it also has the power and ability to act as an economic stimulant (Fig. 3). It creates hundreds of direct and thousands of indirect jobs in various sectors like housing, education, transport, hoteling, medicine and other retail businesses; thus helping the local economy. It also generates a healthy competition for services with the private sector, thus benefitting people in a big way. Unfortunately, 17 Districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are deprived of this important socio-economic stimulus. These districts do not have advanced health care facilities and the people of these districts take their patients to other areas costing them high transaction value for healthcare.

Currently three tertiary care facilities in the provincial capital are inundated by patients with 80% coming from other districts who could have received the desired and appropriate treatment at far lesser cost in their native District Headquarter Hospitals. Consequently the quality of care even in tertiary care hospitals gets diluted.

Medical College: Economic Stimulant

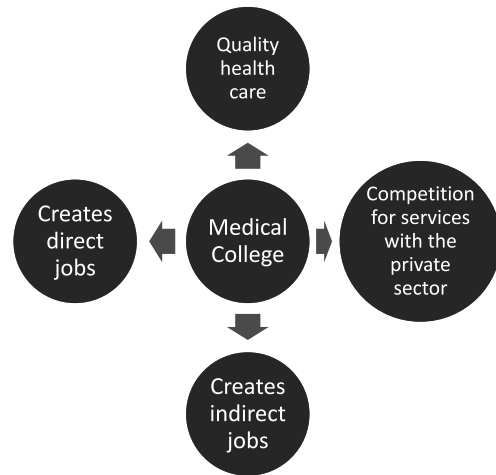


Fig. 3

It is suggested that each District Headquarter (DHQ) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shall have a medical college for 50-100 students. Establishment of Medical College in each DHQ will improve health care services at DHQ level, will ensure strictly supervised quality training of doctors, provide opportunity to deserving middle class students to realize their dream of becoming doctor, ensure quality health care services to people of the concerned district at a much lower cost, enhance National Savings by reducing the cost of health care and enhance quality of life by intelligent use of savings so made. It is further suggested that Government shall open medical colleges at DHQs where heavy investment has already been made in public sector, in terms of infrastructure. Establishment of medical colleges at Kohistan, Buner, Shangla, Upper Dir, Chitral, Battagram and Tor Ghar shall be accomplished through Public Private Partnership as heavy investment would be required in these districts to develop infrastructure necessary for the purpose.

Some of us believe that we have enough medical colleges and spending more on opening new medical colleges is not required. The reasons cited in this editorial may help them change their mind. Opening new medical colleges in public sector would ensure quality of training and stimulate economic activity that would surely surpass the investment.

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