Pakistan is a developing country with limited resources and facing enormous challenges across all areas of human development. In the area of human health, health indicators have gradually improved over the years including life expectancy beyond 65 years; but it fails to reflect the need for more robust responses to challenges healthcare delivery faces in the country. A country’s development and progress is dependent on health of its population. A growing disease burden is not only compromising country’s progress but it is also causing huge burden on limited available resources.

Pakistan is faced with a huge quadruple disease burden. Infectious diseases are rampant and diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, among others, are a major public health challenge for all stakeholders, including policymakers and healthcare providers. Non-communicable diseases are increasing rapidly due to unhealthy lifestyle, rapid urbanization, and breakup of the traditional joint-family system that puts additional pressure on individuals. Diabetes, hypertension, coronary artery disease, and malignancies are on the rise. Mental health is compromised and mental diseases are on the rise. With the rapid advances in transportation, road traffic accidents are contributing substantially to overall disease burden. Mother and child morbidity and mortality are challenging resource-constraint healthcare delivery in the country.

Multiple reasons are responsible for huge disease burden that exists currently in Pakistan. Allocation of limited budget for healthcare has resulted in its provision largely by private sector which unfortunately remains mostly unregulated. The government is unable to provide the resources required for provision of clean water, sanitation and preventive services including vaccination for preventable infectious diseases. Human development focus is lacking resulting in under-educated and largely under-employed population that is unable to properly utilize the scarce-available healthcare resources.

Healthcare delivery is largely to be blamed for huge disease burden in Pakistan. Lack of focus on development and provision of primary healthcare, results in development and propagation of preventable diseases, and identification and treatment of diseases at an advance stage. Patients, when detected at advance stage, gain limited benefit from required high cost of available treatment and rehabilitation.

It is always cost-effective to identify and treat diseases early with better outcomes, in the presence of an effective primary healthcare service provision. Secondary and tertiary levels of healthcare provisions are largely non-functional and add to disease burden. Primary care problems are often dealt with at secondary as well as tertiary levels, resulting in unsatisfactory health-related outcomes and prevent these levels to look after more complicated cases, which are their primary function. The integration between these levels of care is lacking, making health system non-functional as a whole, and increasing disease burden.

A desperate and urgent need exists, to take necessary measures to address these issues and prevent further disease burden escalation in the country. As an initial step, the government needs to give priority to health sector and increase its budgetary allocation for healthcare. It needs to concentrate on using human development approach that focuses on education, social sector development and investment to create employment, so that the society has educated and gainfully employed citizens who have the ability to better utilize available scarce resources.

A substantial portion of government budget allocated for health should be utilized to provide clean and safe drinking water and proper sewerage disposal. It needs to invest and strengthen primary healthcare, to ensure availability of effective preventive services to control growing disease burden. It needs to ensure availability of effective evidence-based screening program which detects diseases at an early stage that can offer effective treatment with better health-related outcomes and lesser costs. The government needs to focus on the provision of recreational and health facilities such as parks and walking tracks.

Mental diseases are on the rise and it is important for the government to invest in the provision of services that promote mental health and effectively tackle mental...
health disorders. It is important to spotlight on road safety and provision of advance trauma care. Provision of security is very important to ensure psychological, social, and physical wellbeing.

It is of great significance for the government to spend available limited resources at its disposal with great care. It is the need of the hour for the government to pay particular attention on regulation of medical education and clinical practice. Framing of effective legislation and its strict enforcement will ensure that private sector, which is heavily engaged in provision of medical education in the country as well as clinical services, is properly regulated and held accountable.

A model of public-private partnership – with private sector investing in medical education and provision of medical services, based on appropriate return on investment principle and regulated and held accountable for its services – should be developed and promoted. A system of health insurance is necessary to ensure that healthcare services, including preventive, curative and rehabilitative, are available to the public.

Pakistan today stands at crossroads and its future development and progress depends on taking important and correct decisions, to ensure that healthcare becomes available to entire population and is easily accessible, equitable and cost-effective. A healthy nation will ensure that it is in a better position to successfully meet upcoming challenges.

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