

A preventive medicine programme in South Africa

Preventive healthcare has become one of the focal areas in terms of the future of healthcare in South Africa.^[1,2] Interestingly, the concept of preventive healthcare was first introduced to the country in 1897 through the Public Health Amendment Act No. 23,^[3] which made provision for separate curative and preventive care. Subsequently, the Public Health Act No. 36 of 1919^[4] gave responsibility for hospital curative care to four provinces, and preventive and promotive healthcare to the local authorities. This separation was continued in the Health Act No. 63 of 1977.^[5] However, the National Health Act No. 61 of 2003 created a unified health system for the country.^[6]

The National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill^[1] is expected to provide 'comprehensive healthcare services that include a continuum of health promotion, disease prevention, diagnosis, treatment and management, rehabilitation and palliative care services across the different levels and sites of care within the health system in accordance with the needs of users.' It provides us a unique opportunity to focus on preventive, promotive care rather than curative hospicentric care.

A number of preventive health programmes were introduced over the past 25 years for communicable diseases (e.g. the expanded programme on immunisation (EPI), the tuberculosis (TB) control programme, voluntary HIV counselling and testing), non-communicable diseases (e.g. cervical cancer, diabetes, hypertension) and maternal health (e.g. antenatal and postnatal care, family planning), yet large numbers of people continue to die prematurely and to suffer unnecessarily from poor health. Treatable conditions are often not being treated in time, and preventable diseases are not being prevented.

Apart from the National Health Promotion Policy and Strategy published in 2014,^[7] there has been no comprehensive preventive health policy formulated to date. Although the current National HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) Policy Guideline^[8] provided an

opportunity to screen for diseases of public health importance (e.g. HIV, TB, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, cervical cancer), it is seldom used as a comprehensive preventive healthcare programme. There is also a need to create dedicated training programmes focusing on preventive healthcare for health professionals.

NHI could provide us with a unique opportunity to deliver not only curative care but also preventive, promotive and rehabilitative health services. However, this would require the re-engineering of the healthcare system through the creation of a dedicated cadre of health professionals focusing on preventive care. Re-establishment of preventive medicine as a specialty would enable provision of much needed leadership in this area.

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