

Title: Nepal's Quest for Health

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Dr. Hemang Dixit is well known in Nepal for his contribution to the development of health science literature. He has been instrumental in the creation of Journal of Nepal Medical Association as its first managing editor and subsequently as its chief editor for several years. While he was working for the Institute of Medicine, he started the Journal of Institute of Medicine and also created the environment for regular publication of Health Science Bibliography of Nepal. He is one of the rare breeds of medical writers in Nepal and his contribution to the advancement of health science literature in Nepal is hard to follow.

In continuation of his contribution to health science literature, he had published the first edition of "Quest for Health" in 1995 and it is to the credit of this book that within a span of less than 5 years, two editions and one reprint of the book were published by 2000. The book must have served the interests of all those who were interested in the state of health and its affairs in Nepal. Dr. Dixit is a busy and prolific literary writer, editor of a medical journal, principal of a medical college and is a much sought after practicing pediatrician. Despite his busy schedule, he is carrying on with the task of recording the progresses or changes in the field of health services, medical education, research, health policies and plans in order to educate the present colleagues and leave a record for the posterity. He deserves the appreciation and gratitude from the entire medical fraternity.

The latest volume of "Quest for Health" has appeared with a revised title "Nepal's Quest for Health" and author's reason

for this revision in the title is that the previous title was "too vague and broad". The assumption of the title is that the type of health services available to the people determines the health as the book has exclusively dealt with the health services, health policies and plans and development of human resources for health in Nepal. The book has six chapters and annexure.

The first chapter "Medicine in the Beginning" starts from the mythical times of Hanuman and concludes with the end of Rana regime. It is helpful to learn what Lord Buddha's prescriptions were for those who were attending to the sick. The qualities listed are quintessential and remind us of our own code of ethics of modern medical councils. This chapter refers to health services, prior to and during the Malla period and describes the health services available to the ruling class and common man in the subsequent periods of history in Nepal. It highlights the introduction of "allopathic" system in Nepal and its acceptance by the ruling class. This chapter gives an insight into the basics of where our health system was merely 55 years back and helps us to understand many health practices prevalent in less exposed rural areas of the country even today and the constraints and odds our health system had to face before reaching the current period.

The second chapter titled "Diseases and control attempts" is mostly about common infectious epidemic/endemic diseases and a brief account of the attempts to prevent, diagnose early and treat or rehabilitate from the effects of these illnesses. In addition the chapter had gone beyond what its title promises- it discusses the primary health care approach in managing these

illnesses and also the issues of rehabilitation of different types of disabilities. Towards the end of the chapter, there is some discussion on the status of supply of essential drugs for prevention and treatment of common diseases. This is a very important chapter and a “must read” for anybody who is interested in understanding the health problems of the country.

The third chapter is titled “Child and maternal health, family planning”. The chapter starts with the most recent population and health statistics, which is very useful information. The starting and development of family planning and immunization services are chronicled in the first part of the chapter. Then other services for women have been discussed. Important problems of child health have also been dealt with briefly in the later section.

The fourth chapter is about training of human resources for health, academics and research activities. Being one of the pioneers in the field of training of human resources for health, the author discusses the issue with first hand experiences. The trials and tribulations of starting and sustaining Institute of Medicine has been closely experienced by him as he was at the helms of affairs of this institute for more than two decades, during its crucial development period. He has succinctly identified the problems of striking a balance between the HRH needs of the health care system and the capacity of the training institutions and between the potential of private initiatives and the training costs. The need to plan for HRH needs vs. usefulness of such and exercise in the modern days of decentralized planning is another other issue of importance discussed. Similarly, he has correctly questioned the practice of liberal permits to open new private medical colleges and their likely impact on viability of existing medical colleges. This chapter has discussed the gradual development of research in health, its possibilities, constraints and future.

The penultimate and fifth chapter is the most important and largest of all the chapters. It deals with the development of health services in Nepal in great detail. It starts with where the first chapter had ended. It has briefly reviewed the development of health services over the last 55 years, the ups and downs, changing of the courses within the government health care system and the growth of health services in nongovernmental and private sector. He has included almost everything of significance in this chapter. It helps to understand the weaknesses inherent in

the present health care system in the country.

Finally the sixth chapter discusses about the plans, policies and their implications. Logically one thinks of policies first and the plans flow from the policy and the success or failures in their implementation determine the need for revision of the policies. However, apparently reflecting the ad hoc nature of functioning within the ministry of health, the chapter starts with the First Long Term Health Plan, then about Country Health Resources and Priorities (one fails to understand its inclusion here and its relationship with the previous section), about Second Long Term Health Plan and national health policies. The chapter contains the statements and paragraphs as they appear in government documents without much input from the author.

After reading the book, one is impressed and awed by the scope and breadth of the book. The vastness of the scope of the book is also its biggest weakness as in trying to include everything of importance; the author has compromised on in depth analysis of the issues discussed. The scope of the book is so vast that every chapter deserves to be developed into a book and this is the reason that it can't satisfy more discerning readers looking for more analytical and less descriptive materials in the book. Another weakness of the book is the lack of uniformity in the format of presentation of different chapters. In some of the chapters (i.e.; Chapter 6) one paragraph does not gel with the subsequent sections. At places there are repetitions which could have been easily avoided.

Despite such minor irritants, this book is a “must read” for anybody who is interested in the development of health services, health status and its determinants in Nepal. I am certain that the students of health sciences, practitioners of health services, researchers, health administrators and policy makers will find this book very useful in their day-to-day work.

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