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The Press And Health Promotion In India

By

Parayil Unnikrishnan
The Press and Health Promotion in India

by Mr. Parayil Unnikrishnan

In a country as large as India with a long way to go to make its 700 million people literate, the influence and the reach of the Press as an opinion moulder or channel of information would inevitably be limited. In fact Radio and in the second place TV have far greater impact than the Press. Until a decade ago the English language newspapers enjoyed a dominant position, showing that readership of newspapers was largely confined to the educated urban elite. But the Indian language newspapers have now overtaken English whose share of the total circulation has as a consequence dwindled to nearly 25 per cent. Despite the sharp increase in the number of newspapers in all languages, the combined circulation of dailies is still only about 15 million which is very low relative to population. The diffusion rate of dailies per thousand people was 15.4 copies in 1975 as compared with the average for Asia, excluding Arab countries, of 65.

Nevertheless the press has played and continues to play an important role in promoting health awareness among the people. Many newspapers run specialised columns by eminent practitioners of medicine including answers to questions from readers on wide range of topics of relevance to public health and personal hygiene.

There are a few instances where the press played a direct role in bringing to government's and public's notice health problems caused by environmental pollution:

1. Reports on respiratory illnesses among workers in a slate factory in Madhya Pradesh led to government action and tightening of standards in the factory.

2. A rayon factory in Kerala was ordered to be closed following exposure in the media about the adverse health effects of effluents in the Chaliyar river.

......2.....
3. The government in Kerala was obliged to give up the project for turning a valley into a reservoir because of the public agitation spearheaded by the press on the ecological imbalance such a step would lead to.

Since India's achievement of Independence in 1947 the press has played a meaningful role in the promotion of understanding of family planning, in educating people about many tropical diseases and in motivating them to develop a scientific approach to these problems. These efforts have contributed to elimination of smallpox and plague, reduction of mortality from cholera and bringing malaria under control. The mortality rate per 1000 of population has been reduced from 27.4 to 14.8 and the life expectancy increased from 32.7 to well over 52.

Major health problems in India are said to arise from poor sanitation, lack of treated drinking water, malnutrition. According to the Indian Council of Medical Research, the technologies for better sanitation, pure drinking water and better nutrition already exist. No research is needed in these areas. The problem is the technologies are not utilised. The health problems are essentially due to inadequate implementation of various health programmes.

There are some successful programmes and the press has given sufficient publicity to these. An example is the midday meals programme to school students of Tamil Nadu. Both the virtues and drawbacks of this scheme had been debated in the press. International organisations have praised this scheme and some other states are planning to introduce it.

Several thousands of hand-pumps have been installed in India for providing drinking water. The press played a valuable role in health education through stories built around hand-pumps.

The Indian government has given high priority to combating goitre following several reports in the press about the incidence of mental retardation in newborns in iodine deficient regions.
Goitre affects 40 million people in 8 states of India in Himalaya foothills. The fact that goitre is not just a cosmetic problem (goitre patient has a neck swelling) but is more serious because of associated mental retardation was highlighted by the press that led to renewed government action.

Virtues of breastfeeding and hazards of smoking are subjects of news reports but it is a fact that Indian press does not launch crusades on health issues as in the West.

Diarrhoea is a major water-borne disease but the advent of a cheap oral drug is not known to many Indians. Guinea worm disease is serious in many parts but the press can do much to educate the masses on how to avoid it. There is thus great scope for health education through media.

In spite of impressive progress and efforts of the press and other agencies, the demographic and health picture of the country still constitutes a cause for serious and urgent concern. The high rate of population growth continues to have an adverse effect on the health of the people and the quality of their lives. The mortality rates for women and children are still alarmingly high; almost a third of the total deaths occur among children below the age of five years; infant mortality is around 129 per thousand live births. Efforts at raising the nutritional levels of the people have still to bear fruit and the extent and severity of malnutrition continues to be exceptionally high. Communicable and non-communicable diseases have still to be brought under effective control and eradicated. Blindness, leprosy and TB continue to have a high incidence. Only 31 per cent of the rural population has access to potable water supply and 0.5 per cent enjoys basic sanitation.

Two outstanding problems stand in the way of comprehensive health care for the people. They are the low economic status of the people and the progressive enlargement of the population pyramid with increase of more than 13 million every year. Population growth continues to undermine the economic growth of the country.
The press has played an important role in evolving general awareness and consciousness about the need of nutrition in the national health programme. The press has very often highlighted that national and regional strategies should be evolved and implemented, on a time bound basis, to ensure adequate nutrition for all segments of the population through a well developed distribution system, specially in the rural areas and urban slums.

Highlighting the stringent measures to be taken to check and prevent the adulteration and contamination of foods at the various stages of their production, processing, storage, transport and distribution, the press has called for uniformity of approach, review of the existing laws and effective legislation by the Central Government.

On immunisation programmes, the press has focussed on the need to launch organised, nationwide immunisation drives, aimed at full coverage of targetted population groups with vaccines against preventable and communicable disease. Such an approach would not only prevent and reduce disease and disability but also bring down the existing high infant and child mortality rate.

The press has on various occasions tried to impress upon these concerned on the urgent need for launching well-considered schemes to prevent and treat diseases and injuries arising from occupational hazards, not only in the various industries but also in the comparatively unorganised sectors like agriculture. For this purpose, the press suggested that the coverage of the Employees State Insurance Act, 1948, may be suitably extended, ensuring adequate coordination of efforts with the general health services.

In order to surmount the problems faced by India in evolving a sound national health system, what is needed is a major shift in emphasis in health services from a curative to preventive-curative approach, from the urban to the rural population, from the privileged to the underprivileged. The orientation should be from the vertical
to a horizontal system of integrated expansion of health services forming a component of other supportive services, which have a bearing on the health status of the people. A blend of political will, people's concerted action and professional skill will be essential for converting the great expectation of 'Health for All by 2000 AD' into a reality.