

Prospects & Challenges of Allied Health care Profession - Bridging the gap of India's Health workforce Shortage

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Abstract : Advances in science and technology have inspired a fundamental shift in health care over the past decade resulting in wider appreciation of the fact that health service delivery must go beyond just physicians and nurses and involve team work among clinicians and non-clinicians or 'paramedical staff.' Better utilization of the whole range of the skills of para-professionals, or Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), is the key to health-sector reforms in India, particularly because of the shortage of doctors and nurses in its semi-urban and rural areas. In view of gaping shortages of doctors, allied healthcare professionals would play an increasingly prominent role in providing health services to India's masses. This paper attempts to give an overview of India's health care sector in brief and presents the prospects of Allied health care profession in overcoming the shortages of health workforce

Overview of India's Health care sector: Economically India is consistently on the growth path but is considered as an emerging nation in terms of human development due to problems like population explosion, unemployment, inability to reduce poverty significantly and other social development aspects primarily the health. The increase in geriatric population by 2026 due to shift in demographics might result in huge patient base. There is also marked increase in life style related diseases, communicable, non-communicable diseases, new and re-emerging infectious diseases like HIV, H1N1 influenza which are adding up to the additional challenges .To handle these challenges there is a need for efficient health system and health workforce in adequate numbers who are properly supported, trained and motivated for accessibility and availability of health systems.

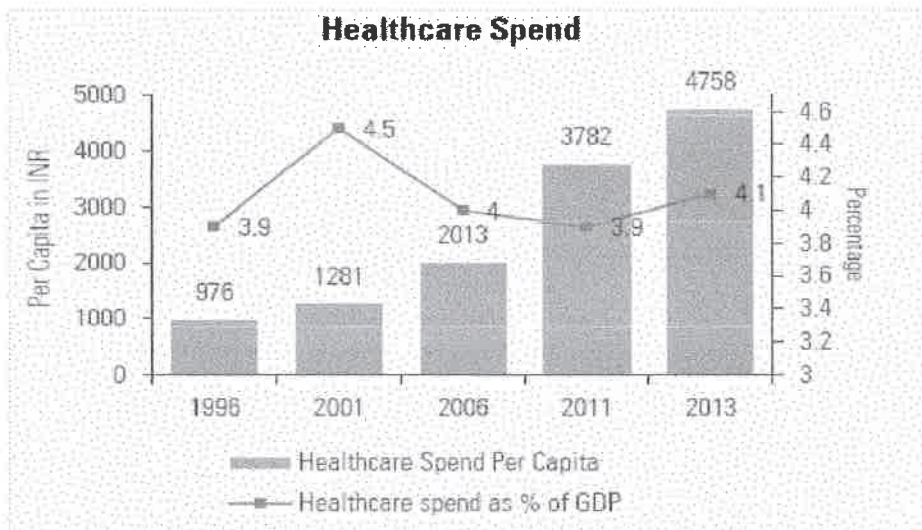

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The Indian health care sector almost grew by almost 100% from 2.75 lakh crores in 2008 to 4.8 lakh crores in 2012. In spite of this growth the health care spending in India is less than 5% of GDP in comparison to other developed countries. Even the government's expenditure is much low in comparison to our peer nations. In India, private healthcare accounts for about 75 percent of the country's total healthcare expenditure leading to issues of unaffordability. The increasing growth of health insurance area, changing demographics, rise in consumer awareness and life style-related diseases will result in increase of health care spending.



(Source : KPMG In India Analysis, IBEF 2013 report and World Bank data)

Health workforce Scenario in India : Health workforce is the heart and an important building bloc of the health system of any country (WHO). There is a consensus that despite their importance this essential building block has been a neglected component in low and middle income countries (JLI, 2000). Challenges exist in managing this component across the globe as imbalances exist in terms of availability of health workforce in number, their skill mix, distribution and training, thereby hindering the human resources of any country to be benefitted by its health system for positive health outcomes. According to a recent Deloitte industry report (Healthcare Outlook Report 2015), 57 countries across the world, including India, face a critical shortage of trained health professionals such as doctors, nurses and allied healthcare workers. As per the report, certain states in India are experiencing an acute shortage of healthcare personnel. Further the problem is compounded by poor distribution of health professionals, 80% of whom work in the private sector in urban areas. Inequalities in the distribution of health workers are highest for doctors, nurses and allied healthcare workers and have a significant effect on health outcomes. This lack of qualified professionals is one of the major challenges for the Indian health care industry. The situation has become more critical as there is higher concentration of

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medical professionals in urban areas, who account for only 30% of India's total population. Furthermore, India has an acute shortage of allied health workers who are the first to go to resource in emergency cases. For example, there is a huge shortfall of radiology and imaging professionals across the country. States witnessing these huge skill gaps are Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Assam followed by Delhi.

The following table represents the Health workforce scenario of India with respect to our peer nations:

Indicators	Year	INDIA	US	UK	BRAZIL	CHINA
Hospital bed density(per 10000 population)	2000-2010	12	31	39	24	30
Doctor density (per 10000 population)	2000-2010	6	27	21	17	14
Births attended by skilled health personnel(percent)	2000-2010	47	99	NA	97	98
Number of doctors	2010	6,43,520	7,93,648	1,26,126	3,20,013	18,62,630
Number of Nurses	2010	13,72,059	29,27,000	37,200	5,49,423	122,59,240
Number of Dentists	2010	53,344	4,63,663	25,914	2,17,217	1,36,520
Avg no. of doctors per bed	2010	0.6	0.81	0.53	0.69	0.46
Avg.no. of nurses per bed	2010	1.27	3	0.16	1.18	3.02
Number of doctors per 1000 population	2010	0.6	2.7	2.1	1.7	1.4
Number of nurses per 1000 population	2010	1.3	9.8	0.6	2.9	1

(Source: www.oecd.org, www.whoindia.org)

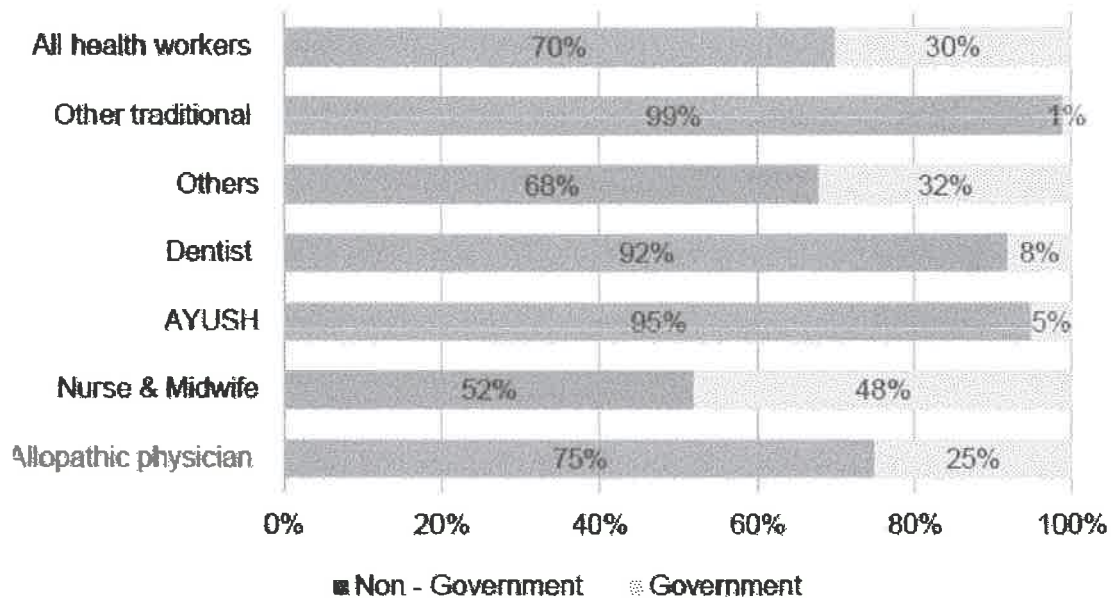
70% of health workers are concentrated in urban areas while only 30% workers are catering to the health care needs of rural population. The majority of the health

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workers working in urban areas are working for private health care thereby increasing the urban rural disparity in terms of delivery of qualitative health care.



(Source : NSDC report:Human Resource and Skill requirements in Health care sector:2013-17,Volume 14)

Allied Health care Profession bridging the health workforce shortage : The public health system in India suffers from weak stewardship and oversight, HR shortages, weak HR management and ineffective service delivery particularly in rural areas. The availability of qualified human resources for health has emerged as a significant challenge in the way of India’s attempt to reform the public health care system by making universal health coverage a reality. The HR crunch is aggravated due to uneven distribution of health personnel and attrition due to inadequate growth opportunities, work overload and migration.

To ensure the availability of right human resources for quality care at primary, secondary and tertiary levels there is a need to train Allied Health care personnel (AHP) to deal with future epidemics due to shortage of Human resources for health. AHPs can play a critical role in improving the reach of health services in underserved areas.

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Definition of Allied Health Care Professional : Allied health care professionals include individuals involved with the delivery of health or related services, with expertise contributing in therapeutic, diagnostic, curative, preventive and rehabilitative interventions. They work in interdisciplinary health teams along with physicians, specialists, nurses and paramedics to promote, protect, treat and/or manage an individual's physical, mental, social, emotional, and holistic well-being.

According to the Association of Schools of Allied Health Professions (ASAHP), allied health professionals are "involved with the delivery of health or related services pertaining to the identification, evaluation and prevention of diseases and disorders; dietary and nutrition services; and rehabilitation and health systems management.

With advancements in technology the quality of medical care has vastly improved creating an opportunity for human resources who can handle highly sophisticated medical technology. With diagnosis depending on technology, the role of allied health staff has become vital for delivering successful treatment. But in India the Allied Health professionals are hired on a contractual basis with a majority of them providing therapeutic and technical services such as optometry, dental, surgical interventions and rehabilitative care. The miscellaneous category of Allied health Professionals are General duty assistants and record keepers who are also hired on contractual basis.

Challenges in the Educational opportunities of Allied health care profession : For education and training of Allied health personnel, there are a number of courses ranging from short-term (up to 3 months), certificate, diploma, and graduate level. Such courses are helping in introduction of new categories of personnel as a norm rather than standardization as there is no central regulatory body governing the educational standards for AHP's unlike Doctors, Dentists and Nurses. Due to the absence of a central regulatory authority for allied health professionals the available courses in India, are regulated by independent professional bodies at national and state levels. This is resulting in variation of the rules, norms of professional practice of AHP's such as physiotherapists, optometrists in comparison with other professionals such as operating room technicians and radiation therapists.

Considering the current health workforce shortage scenario it important to have a common regulatory authority at the central level which will help the AHPs to flourish as a family rather than as a different class within the health care system. Maintenance of uniform standards of education in varied disciplines of Allied Health care stream is required. Uniformity in entry level qualifications, period of training,

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course curricula delivered, fee structure and facilities need to be regulated. Enforcing ethical standards and registration of AHP's should also be enforced.

Private players can play a key role in capacity building for improving health workforce through PPP models to take AHP education and training by utilising the existing infrastructure of public health care system. Such training initiatives will help in improving the health workforce quantitatively as well qualitatively, provided the global standardization norms are followed while designing the curriculum.

To conclude, Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) constitute a vital part of the health system and Allied health workers are an untapped treasure, critical to fixing the gaping holes in India's health workforce, particularly the severe shortage of physicians and specialists. While the government is considering strategies to best utilize AHPs, the private sector has realised their potential and established several institutions and mechanisms to integrate these professions and professionals into the organised healthcare sector.


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