

Preventive medicine clinics in hospitals of India: An opportunity missed

Abstract

Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) are emerging as a major cause of morbidity and mortality. Control of risk factors and early diagnosis and treatment are cost-effective modalities for prevention. To attain this, Preventive Medicine Clinics must become a regular feature in the government hospitals of India. Community Medicine and/or Family Medicine specialists of medical colleges can establish these clinics. In addition to screening patients for NCDs and their risk factors, these clinics can screen patients who require primary health care and manage them appropriately.

Key words: Non-communicable diseases, preventive medicine clinics, primary prevention, risk factors, screening, secondary prevention

INTRODUCTION

As a result of epidemiological and demographic transition, Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) are emerging as the major cause of morbidity and mortality globally. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report (2002), cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) will be the largest cause of death and disability in India by 2020.^[1] The WHO member states have agreed to the goal of '25 by 25': Twenty-five percent reduction in mortality due to four main NCDs (CVDs, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases) by 2025.^[2] The National Program for Control and Prevention of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular diseases, and Stroke (NPCDCS) aims to integrate NCDs into the existing framework of the *National Rural Health Mission* (NRHM).^[3]

Treatment of NCDs being expensive, the overall cost of treatment has increased. Control of risk factors and early diagnosis and treatment are cost-effective modalities for prevention.^[4] Hence, the need for primary and secondary prevention of NCDs at all levels of healthcare. We propose the establishment of preventive medicine clinics at hospitals, especially under medical colleges, to provide these services.

ROLE OF PREVENTIVE MEDICINE CLINICS

It is a known fact that tertiary hospitals in India are overburdened^[5,6] by patients requiring a lower level of expertise, because of the failure of primary and secondary healthcare. In addition, there is no mechanism put in place to check this. In such a scenario, preventive medicine clinics can play a dual role in tertiary hospitals: (i) For opportunistic screening of NCDs and (ii) as screening Outpatient Departments (OPD). As a clinic for opportunistic screening of NCDs, patients can be screened for risk factors for NCDs (primary prevention) like tobacco, alcohol, physical inactivity, diet, and so on, and various NCDs/chronic illnesses (secondary prevention) like diabetes, hypertension, obesity, hypercholesterolemia, cataract, breast cancer, cervical cancer, oral cancer, colorectal cancer, *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV), and the like. The standard screening criteria and screening tests must be used, which will make the whole process cost-effective. Preventive medicine clinics can also act as screening OPDs to filter patients, who require secondary/tertiary care, and refer them to the appropriate OPDs after initiating primary healthcare. Those who require primary care only, can be managed at this level itself. Here too, standard management protocols must be followed. This will reduce the burden on other clinical specialties; which will enable them to give quality care to the patients referred to them by the preventive medicine clinic.

Irrespective of the specialty or super-specialty, a clinician must be trained in preventive medicine, but the reality is different. We have to agree that the preventive medicine component has not been given

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enough emphasis in the medical curricula.^[7] Preventive medicine is an integral part of Community Medicine practice. It is part and parcel of the family health practice. Special clinics called Preventive Medicine Clinics must be part of a hospital setup. The concept of preventive medicine clinics has picked up outside India.^[8,9] They are not a regular feature of our government hospitals in India; although one can find them in corporate hospitals.^[10-12]

Hence, clinicians who are trained both in preventive medicine and clinical medicine, say community physicians (public health, preventive and social medicine, community medicine) or family physicians (family medicine) can establish preventive medicine clinics in their respective hospitals and health centers. These clinics may have a faculty in charge and various trained medical and paramedical staff.

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