Editorial

Mind: the neglected determinant of health

World has faced with a new generation of health challenges since recent times. While communicable diseases are inflicting heavy damages on human populations, non-communicable diseases such as trauma, cardiovascular diseases, malignancies and diabetes mellitus have also become significant public health problems. Unfavourable human behaviours such as child abuse, domestic violence, gang warfare and unhealthy lifestyles are some of the causative factors identified to be responsible for considerable amount of human suffering.

Health is defined by the WHO as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (1). Since its inception in 1948, this definition has not been amended to date. However, achieving complete health does not appear to be in the agenda of any health authority in Sri Lanka or internationally. Other than planning short and medium term health measures long term health planning does not appear to take place or has not been effective. Most of the long term health plans are, in fact, short term or medium term plans. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that non-communicable diseases that was not a big problem in Sri Lanka in the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century has now become a formidable public health problem. A successful planning unit could have anticipated this. Had any long term measure been taken, this problem would not have been as bad as what it is now.

Decisive factor

Mental well being is a neglected component of health. Mental health has been confined, very often, to prevention and treatment of psychiatric illness of various kinds, counseling, and prevention of suicide and attempted suicide. The universal truth that mind is the forerunner of all states and deeds (2) is a decisive factor that many health planners are ignorant about or have ignored. Hence, this crucial determinant has not been taken into account in health planning.

The importance of mind and health has been pointed out several times in the recent past (3,4,5). Untrained mind is linked to many psychological, social and physical ailments including diabetes mellitus, ischaemic heart disease, hypertension, violence of all forms, child abuse and HIV/AIDS to name a few. The trend of all these states is increasing both locally and globally. Though some countries have checked the upward trend through primary and secondary preventive measures, no action has been taken at primodial level to address the mind in order to produce a long term trend setting. We, Sri Lanka can do this if our advocacy is strong enough to create a vision at policy level.

Director Mind and Health

At operational level there should be a strong commitment of sufficient magnitude to initiate an intervention. In this regard Sri Lanka cannot learn much from the developed countries. Creating a post of *Director of Mind and Health* in the Ministry of Health is an ambitious but realistic option as there are countless opportunities of implementing behaviour modification through improved mind. As the present healthcare delivery system is not geared to make use of these opportunities, even establishing a new ministry for mind training and behaviour modification is justified. It will give a wider approach to this need in other spheres such as economy, social welfare, defense etc. The broad areas to be addressed are stress reduction measures and life style change and helping to train mind to control desires of various kinds. Mind training approach will also help to control HIV/AIDS, child abuse, sexual offences etc. Mind training can also be directed at controlling anger, resentment and antagonism thereby finding a solution to various facets of violence.

Methods such as meditation can be introduced to the community through identified staff in the health units headed by Medical Officers of Health or health education units of the hospitals. Even creating a new infrastructure for this purpose will be an investment in the long run. Training of trainers of meditation can be done with spiritual leaders and other experienced people within the country.

Time has come for innovative thinking and action than ever before or else health and social issues prevailing are likely to go out of proportion. What ever action that is to be taken, it should be innovative, robust, sustainable and extensive.

References

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