Theme: "Primary Care"

DHAKA DECLARATION 2023

Pandemic preparedness is built upon a robust primary health care system

Primary health care (PHC) is to organize the national health systems in an effective manner, so that health services and public health are accessible to all segments of the population. It is the first level of national health service for individuals, a family and the population and may serve as a gateway to secondary and tertiary health services. It should be accessible and near their homes and work place. Good primary health care provision may save 60 million lives and increase average life expectancy by 3.7 years in low- and middle-income countries by 2030. It is the maxim that all individuals have the right to attain the highest level of health. To achieve this, we need a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

In a pandemic, the role of the PHC would be to identify new cases, support surveillance, provide continuous care based on scientific evidence, provide effective communication and supply chain management. The experience of COVID-19 pandemic depicted the weakness of primary health care globally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, if the PHC was ready to combat contagion as a part of an effective public health system; millions of lives would have been saved.

In the pre and post pandemic phase, the PHC shall identify and halt new infections, sustain essential health services instead of disruption, build up resilience capacity of the community, infection prevention and control (IPC) for patient and health care workers. A critical lesson from the pandemic is that trust is fundamentally important to ensure adherence to public health, social measures and effective vaccination. Effective PHC builds trust between individuals and providers and between communities and the healthcare system. A high degree of robustness of the PHC will prevent and ensure protection against future pandemics.

Governments must play their part and strengthen primary healthcare to achieve universal health coverage (UHC). They can do this by increasing political commitment and leadership, promoting community engagement, promoting innovation (digital initiatives, etc.) in public and private sectors, ensuring adequate and competent healthcare staffing, expanding much needed financing, utilizing technical assistance and improving infrastructure and logistics for safe delivery of primary health care services.

Strengthening PHC would go a long way towards achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly the attainment of UHC. The preparation against future pandemic threats can be ensured if a robust PHC is in place. Global public health security cannot be ensured without addressing the strong foundation of PHC.