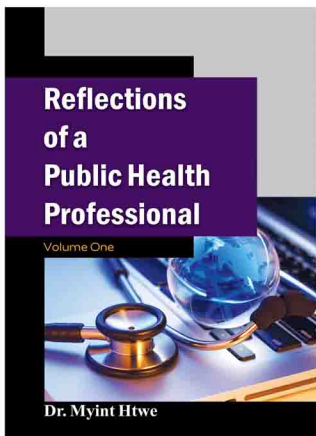


Eight Basic Probes Before Initiating a Health Programme - Drinking Water and Health



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17. Eight basic probes before initiating a health programme: "Drinking Water and Health"

(Based on the opening and closing remarks delivered at the technical session of the symposium on "Drinking Water and Health", organized by Myanmar Academy of Medical Science (MAMS) at the Department of Medical Research, Yangon. 7 March 2015).

Generally, the work area on "Drinking Water and Health" covers a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from water safety plan to microbiological, chemical and toxicological contamination to household water treatment and storage. These topics are interconnected and highly relevant to the current need of our country. We need to think with open and receptive minds if we would like to improve this work area by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and other relevant entities. Open views, forward-looking and future-oriented ideas by concerned professionals are desirable in pursuing, expanding and improving the overall scenario of "Drinking Water and Health" in our country. Along this line of thinking and with long-term sustainability and perspectives in mind, it would be beneficial if we review at least the following eight basic probes, before embarking on the development of short-term and long-term strategies for improving "Drinking Water and Health" in the country. In fact, *these eight basic probes are relevant for consideration on any subject of public health importance either in initiating a programme or strengthening a programme.* These eight probes are:

- (i) *To what extent are "Drinking Water and Health" issues reflected in our national health policy, national health research policy, national health plans, and strategies?*

- (ii) *To what extent are “Drinking Water and Health” issues reflected in collaborative programmes of UNICEF, WHO, UNDP and other relevant INGOs and entities?*
- (iii) *To what extent are “Drinking Water and Health” issues included in the curricula of undergraduate medical and postgraduate MPH & MPTM courses?*
- (iv) *To what extent are “Drinking Water and Health” actually given preferential importance by the health literacy promotion and environmental health sections of the Department of Public Health?*
- (v) *To what extent is research on “Drinking Water and Health” issues being conducted and the research findings utilized?*
- (vi) *To what extent are data and information available on “Drinking Water and Health”?*
- (vii) *To what extent budgetary allocation is made to carry out activities related to “Drinking Water and Health” in the budget sheets of MoH, other relevant ministries, and Municipal Development Corporation (MCD)? National Health Account will yield some information on budgetary aspects.*
- (viii) *What is the quantum of health workforce that can deal with water and sanitation issues?*

To effectively handle and overcome the challenges hinging around “Drinking Water and Health” issues, we need to work in close collaboration with UNICEF, WHO, UNDP, relevant local and international NGOs, community-based-organizations (CBOs) or civil society organizations (CSOs) at the ground level.

While we are involved in these issues related to “Drinking Water and Health”, we should not lose sight of the *importance of the availability of timely and reliable data and information* to expose the ground reality. Some crucial

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information can be obtained from research carried out by the Department of Medical Research, universities and other relevant agencies and organizations. This is very important not only for monitoring but also for preparing a rational national plan with long-term vision in mind. At the same time, we need to know and assess the national level scenario from a broader perspective. *Our views must be at the higher level, i.e., national and global.* Our activities must also be linked with what others are doing at the supra-national or global level, i.e., considering experience from other developing countries.

To include all aspects such as data and information in one perspective, we should strive for collecting and collating all necessary updated data and information, including research findings by the Department of Medical Research in this subject area, so that we can establish a data repository on water-related matters in the country. We should also not lose sight of the *importance of validating currently available data*. It is important to know the real scenario and we may even think of developing a new data-based system for ease of reference by all those concerned. It is also crucial that all players in this field share data and information among relevant stakeholders.

Networking of stakeholders would be an advantage. It also requires the proactive involvement of the National Health Laboratory and the Municipal Development Corporation in water sanitation issues. The role of conducting *“implementation research”* on different water sanitation programmes and activities should not be forgotten and it should be emphasized.

There is also an urgent necessity of conducting *regular refresher training courses for health care workers* and other relevant professionals on water sanitation aspects and different contamination pathways that might occur, including water-related diseases, water-borne diseases and water-associated diseases. The impact would only be felt if all those concerned work as a team in an integrated and cohesive manner.

Like WHO's World Health Days, each World Water Day has a theme and for this year it is "Water and Sustainable Development". We need to advocate policy makers in our country about possible propaganda activities that could be carried out around World Water Day. Some of us might also recall that 194 WHO Member States, including Myanmar, had endorsed World Health Assembly resolution on "*Drinking-Water, Sanitation, and Health*"(WHA 64.24) in 2011, which clearly stated the activities to be carried out at the country level, to improve drinking water, sanitation and health. Even the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution entitled "*Human Rights and Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation*"(A/HRC/15/L.14) in 2010. It recognizes the right to safe water and sanitation as a human right on the same level as other social rights such as the right to food and right to health. It contains many facts, which could serve as policy support to move ahead for improving "Drinking Water and Health".

Several public health professionals are involved in framing, formulating or reformulating national plans or strategies in the domain of "Drinking Water and Health". The World Health Assembly resolution and United Nations Human Rights Council resolution gives a clear sense of direction for improving the scenario.

Conclusion

This subject matter has strong linkages with many diseases and conditions. Its importance should be clearly reflected in the objectives of MoH and other relevant ministries. Appropriate budgetary allocation should be made and we need to promote and intensify systematic collaboration and work closely with UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, other like-minded agencies, organizations and international NGOs. Inter-ministerial collaboration and coordination are crucial. This can be achieved through the good offices of the National Health Committee.

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In essence, our ultimate aim should be “*potable drinking water for the population at large must be sufficient, acceptable, affordable and physically accessible*”. Let us work together to reduce the burden of diseases and conditions related to various perspectives of water availability as well as water quality.

(NB. This is the updated version of the article, which appeared in the Bulletin of Preventive and Social Medicine Society, Volume 1, Number 4, October 2015.)