
Editorial View

Role of Family Physician in the view of COVID-19 Crisis

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The COVID-19 is a rapidly emerging worldwide health crises started by recognition of the first case in Wuhan, china on 29th of December 2019 the disease rapidly spread worldwide and on the 9th of March 2020 the World health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic status of the disease, as for 22th of April there is 2.5 million confirmed Corona virus cases and hundred thousand deaths worldwide.

Although 85% of COVID-19 cases doesn't require hospital admission, and only 5% need Intensive Care and ventilatory support the rapid increase in number and sharp upright direction of the epidemic curve can lead to health system failure, so mass and individual measures of social distancing, lock downs, teleworking, and awareness campaigns were undertaken by countries and authorities to flatten the that epidemiological curve and decreases the surge of the disease.

The governments have responded worldwide to the recommendations of reorientation of medical practice towards achieving health for all with variable

enthusiasm. Such response was through reforming the current health system to provide the optimal care to meet the requirements of relevance, quality, cost-effectiveness and equity in health. The crucial role of five-star doctor (Family Doctor) in the new health system was considered as a crucial component. Faced by the new pandemic, the role of family physician in the frontlines of care for both COVID-19 and Non COVID services has be defined and cleared, as some health systems like the UK chose to "guard" family physician from any direct contact with suspected COVID-19 patients or even respiratory complaints and save their effort to ensure continuity of health services and provided a clear "Stay Home" Guidance and phone triage guideline for GPs.

On the other hand, other systems opted for family physicians joining the fight in screening, surveillance, assessment, testing, home and non-ICU hospital management, some health systems even went further with fast training and transformation of family physicians to

provide ICU level care. In this editorial we aim to highlight what the journal editorial board believes it is either key or optional roles of family physicians in context of the crisis.

In the joint WHO and WONCA conference emphasized on concept of five-star doctor and recommended that: The Family Doctor (Family Physician/General Practitioner) should have a central role in achieving of quality, cost effectiveness and equity in health care system. Many roles supposed to be played by this 5-star doctor including: care provider, decision maker, communicator, community leader and manager. These roles were considered as criteria for winning of WONCA's award of Excellence in Health Care that called the Five Star Doctor Award announced by WONCA (2010).

Being a community leader required paying more attention to the determinants of health and disease in the community. Also, training of family physician on role of family physician in public health is a crucial in this regard. Perceiving the community as diagnostic tool in some of the public health problems as an outbreak/pandemic is of utmost important. Using the available resources and mobilizing others for the benefit of the practice population is

required. Sharing the community in planning, implementation and evaluation of the operational plan of the primary health facilities is very important in this regard.

Also, the current role of family physicians within the healthcare system inherently holds many of the characteristics needed for public health-primary care interface. Family medicine clinical and health care activities such as preventive clinical practices, screening and early preventive intervention, early diagnosis and intervention, quality driven and evidence-based care, health promotion and health advocacy integrate with public health activities such as population surveillance, disease control, health promotion and action based on determinants of health, injury prevention, and policy generation to produce a perfectly functioning health system.

Indeed, despite public health-primary care interface operating independently for decades, the overlap and contribution of each with a common goal of both individual and population health is great. Such roles played by family physician could be refined, fostered and little bit modified according to emergencies and challenges facing the health systems worldwide. Nobody can

deny that Novel Corona Virus Diseases - 2019(COVID-19) is an emergency and a strong challenge facing the current health systems. On attacking the current health systems, it explored and disclosed their pitfalls and deviancies. Also, there are devastating consequences of COVID- 19 pandemic at a level of individual, family and community on side of the coin. Also, psychological and economic burden has been raised on another side.

Proposed Role of Family Physician:

1. Education, providing sound information and myth bluster

People trust their family physician as a source of factual and sound scientific information, family physician, through his knowledge about his country specific epidemiological report and evidence based information and guidelines sources is a bedrock in providing information about disease spread, preventive measures at workplaces, schools, caring homes and other life activities and prognosis. We all witnessed the rapid and large scale spread of wrong information and measures to combat the virus, here come the role of the family physician as myth blustering: fast response by correction of false news and mis-concepts. The factual knowledge gained from the family doctor is essential

intervention against COVID-19 anxieties and fears widely spread in all communities.

2. Infection Prevention and Control

It is essential that family practice be a safe clinical practice for both providers and people, strict implementation of the national prevailing or World Health Organization recommended infection control and prevention (ICP) is expected this include:

- Training of staff on ICP
- Health education of people and staff on handwashing
- Rational use of personal protective equipment

3. Screening, Early Case detection and Diagnosis

Triage of respiratory complaints and referring suspected COVID-19 for testing is a key role of family physician, following updated national provided or internationally available guidelines of suspected and confirmed cases, this role can be expanded to categorizing suspected cases disease severity status using red flags or symptoms of severity, this triage system better to be done via phone triage, with clear documentation and pathways for different scenarios.

Whether family physicians should have access to order and request confirmatory tests is another question, with many

countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region keeping the process of testing and confirmation very central for accurate reporting and epidemiological statistics.

4. NON-COVID-19: Ensure Continuity of Care and Adapting Changes

As experience showed that more people died from discontinuation of essential medical services, continuity of care is one of the most important roles, how to ensure continuity of care for non COVID-19 patients? How can management of different diseases change in the context of pandemic? Even preventive services as vaccination, breast-feeding and nutritional counselling will have some changes, antenatal care visits and components will change. The structure of the consultation and the ways of communication will change, with new trend of adopting telemedicine and mHealth applications or basically doing changes in the arrangement of the waiting areas, booking slots and consultation room to fit the post COVID-19 era. These changes can extend to disease follow up intervals and adopting auto-refills of medications.

Leadership and managerial roles of the family doctor in his practice are keys for this change that will include adding those

new infection control and prevention supplies and respiratory medication and devices as oximeters and oxygen sources and other medications to the supply chain of his practice. The work and tasks ahead of family doctors are enormous, the working hours are expected to increase to adapt the changes, giving high quality care and decreasing waiting times, this will lead to excessive load on family doctors; so many guidelines were developed to help the family doctors to avoid turnout and COVID-19 related stress.

5. Possible (Optional) Roles

There are lots of debates and discussions on family doctor's role in hospital settings for direct COVID-19 management, as mentioned earlier, some my favor "shielding" or "guarding" primary care physicians for continuity of essential health care services, others adopted more active role of family doctors in early detection, screening, case tracing and active surveillance and few went further to provide rapid training on ICU and ventilatory support, the progress of the pandemic will to large extent decide the ceiling of roles of family doctors in direct management. Last but not least, COVID-19 raised so many questions, family doctors will need to find answers for those questions by joining and

doing research, those researches will help us understand our clear role in COVID-19 and post COVID era.

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