

The Relevance of Primary Care in India

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Primary care is the backbone of any effective healthcare system. It is vital for India, a country with a large and diverse population and various health-related issues. Primary care in India serves many purposes, such as ensuring access and affordability of healthcare, preventing and managing diseases, and promoting public health. This article explores the importance of primary care in India, its challenges, and the possible ways to improve it.

What is the Condition of Primary Care in India

India's healthcare infrastructure has historically favored tertiary care, as seen by the large number of tertiary care hospitals [1]. However, global evidence shows that strong primary healthcare systems lead to better health outcomes, lower death rates, and reduced healthcare costs [2]. India has recognized this and has been shifting its focus to primary healthcare in recent years. Sadly progress is slow and recognition towards primary care is slow.

Primary healthcare is a fundamental component of any country's health system. In India, the National Health Mission backs the primary healthcare system and is funded by state governments.

Nonetheless, India's overall healthcare situation leaves much to be desired. Primary Health Care Centers (PHCs) are still insufficient and inaccessible in many rural areas, compounded by a lack of awareness and unhealthy lifestyle habits among the population.

Moreover, over 70% of primary healthcare services are provided by private entities. This makes healthcare unaffordable for a significant portion of society who cannot bear the high costs associated with it.

Adding to the grim scenario is the increasing prevalence of both communicable and non-communicable diseases. Changes in lifestyle and environmental degradation are the causes, but they

put extra strain on India's existing health systems. Understanding the importance of primary healthcare in India is crucial before making any decisions.

While healthcare has advanced rapidly in terms of expertise and services, leading to various specializations, it may give the false impression that all aspects of healthcare have improved. However, this is not the case. The World Health Report 2007 highlights three critical issues plaguing the current healthcare scenario [3].

- Inequality in healthcare delivery, both globally and within countries.
- The inability to adequately respond to the evolving nature of health problems due to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and factors such as unplanned urbanization, climate change, and societal tensions.
- The unpreparedness and vulnerability of health systems to adapt to rapid changes and transformations, including institutional role redefinitions, unregulated commercialization in healthcare delivery, and politicized patient rights and entitlement claims.

The lack of primary care exacerbates these issues in the current healthcare situation.

India has a Unique Position

India, the world's second-most populous country, has a unique healthcare landscape. It is renowned for offering high-quality, specialized healthcare at affordable prices, making it a popular destination for medical tourism. However, the majority of its own population grapples with poor health conditions. Despite being known for cost-effective, high-quality healthcare, India's citizens are often left with two options - resort to the unregulated and

frequently overpriced private healthcare sector or rely on the public health system, which is generally perceived as substandard⁴. As per Balarajan et al [4], private spending accounts for more than three-fourths of India’s total health expenditure, and high out-of-pocket costs result in over half of Indian households falling into poverty [5]. Prior research indicates that a robust primary care network coupled with a strong public health system could potentially improve this situation and promote better health equity.

India indeed has a primary healthcare system, which was established based on the recommendations of the Bhore Committee in 1946 [5]. The country enthusiastically committed to the “Health For All by 2000 AD” goal in its National Health Policy, 1983, and more recently to the "Universal Health Coverage by 2022"[6]. However, these commitments are likely to fail unless significant improvements are made to India’s primary care system.

The need of the hour is a redefined role and responsibility for primary healthcare, along with a strong commitment towards it.

Primary care services are characterized by four main features

- First-contact access for each new need.
- Long-term person-focused (not disease-focused) care.
- Comprehensive care for most health needs.
- Coordinated care when it must be sought elsewhere [6].

Therefore, primary care caters to a large portion of the population and is expected to provide both primary and secondary levels of prevention, along with referral services. By its very definition and scope, primary care is a specialty. Practitioners in this field should have expertise in community needs assessment, community diagnosis, community-based treatment, addressing structural reasons for common illnesses, and early diagnosis and prompt treatment of individuals, similar to their colleagues working in hospitals [3]. However, more complex cases need to be referred [7].

This is crucial for improving the current situation and achieving Universal Health Coverage. This paper advocates for the development of primary care as a specialization in India as a key measure to reform its healthcare system. The specialization in primary care should be developed to find effective and practical solutions for poor healthcare at grassroots levels.

Four key issues emphasize the need and importance of primary care specialization

- The dynamic scope of primary care specialization.
- Tapping into the true potential of primary care.
- The scope and need for research in primary care.
- The relationship between primary care and public health.

By addressing these issues, India can make significant strides towards improving its healthcare system and achieving its health goals.

A summary of the key areas of primary care specialization

Activity	Delivery unit	Nature of work	Role of primary care specialist
Primordial prevention	Populations likely to be at risk	Screening Health education and promotion	Active engagement with training of grassroot workers
Primary prevention	Population at risk	Health promotion and specific protection	Surveillance, monitoring, and Evaluation
Secondary prevention*	Individuals	Early diagnosis and treatment by both field-based active surveillance and outpatient clinics at the center	Consultancy - prescribing both treatment and prophylaxis. Stabilization and referral
Tertiary prevention	Individuals	Prevention of complications, disability limitation, and rehabilitation	Disability limitation Supervisory role for rehabilitation
Epidemic control	Population	Epidemic prediction and preparedness	Epidemic indicator analysis, sentinel surveillance, and epidemic control
Health programs: Development and delivery	Population	Specific community needs assessment Evaluation of program efficiency, gaps in the program, and interventions to fill the gaps	Development of intervention strategy Monitoring and supervision of delivery of the program at the primary care level

*Secondary prevention in an individual should be coupled with primary prevention at the family level, wherever applicable

Why is Primary Care Unpopular in India

Primary care is often seen as a last resort by the general public, mainly due to unaffordability or other constraints. Despite some improvements, the perception remains that these facilities are understaffed, ill-equipped, and have poor infrastructure, including location [8,9]. This perception needs to be addressed to improve the utilization and effectiveness of primary care services.

Approaching The Problem

- Effective gatekeeping can significantly reduce the burden on higher-level healthcare centers. This, in turn, can enhance their accountability and transparency, protect patients from overtreatment, and decrease the rate of patient transmission at these centers. A primary care practitioner with specialized skills and knowledge can serve as an efficient gatekeeper. This role requires a solid understanding of referral processes and relevant legal laws, which a specialist is more likely to possess compared to a non-specialist.
- Peek into the epidemiology and demography shift in India. India is experiencing an epidemiological and demographic shift that is unparalleled due to its large population and diversity. The country is grappling with the residual burden of communicable diseases and malnutrition, as well as the rising burden of non-communicable and lifestyle diseases. This is further complicated by factors such as aging and other transitional changes in the country [10].

Diseases at both ends of the spectrum, such as undernutrition or obesity, can be most effectively managed at the primary care level. Ignoring these diseases only complicates cases, increases treatment costs, and leads to poorer prognosis when managed at higher-level healthcare centers.

An efficient primary care specialist can proactively confront these transitional diseases through primary prevention. This starts with screening and extends to periodic monitoring of various body systems. This approach can significantly improve health outcomes and reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

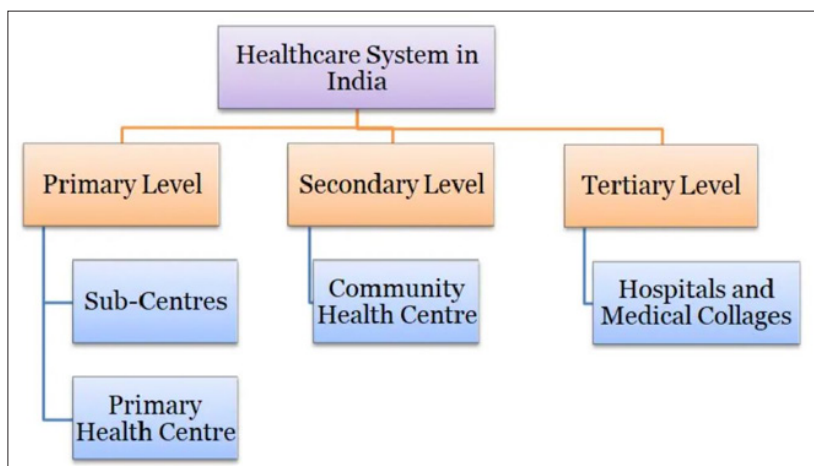
• Need for Primary Care Research

While primary care handles the majority of health issues in many countries, it has been lacking in terms of research contributions [11]. The lack of primary care specialists and the insufficient focus on primary care in India have left this field largely unexplored in research. This highlights the need for more attention and resources to be directed towards primary care research to improve healthcare outcomes.

Summary of key research areas in primary care [7].

<i>Primary Care Epidemiology</i>	<i>Interventional Researches</i>	<i>Structural & Operational Researches</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Diagnosis • Community Treatment • Identification of sentinel & early signs • Interface between health system & community • Epidemic prediction & preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Randomized Evaluations • Quasi experimental evaluations • Pilot Interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural causes & management. • Operational researches to address performance gaps • Addressing poor utilization from the community's perspective primary care

Levels of Primary Care in India



Way Forward and Conclusions

In conclusion, a significant portion of the population lacks access to Primary Health Care Centers (PHCs). Even when PHCs are accessible, they often suffer from understaffing, inadequate equipment, insufficiency, and inefficiency. Lower-income households often have no choice but to bypass PHCs and seek healthcare from informal private providers or avoid hospital visits until the illness has advanced and become expensive to treat. These households often end up selling assets to afford care at private facilities, which is precisely the adverse outcome that primary healthcare should aim to prevent. Public tertiary healthcare facilities are frequently overburdened and lack resources and staff. There is generally a lack of a functional triage system and proper referral mechanisms are almost non-existent. This highlights the urgent need for improvements in primary healthcare in India. [13, 14].

There is a pressing need to boost budget allocations for healthcare, with public expenditure on healthcare constituting at least 70% of total health expenditure. It is projected that such an increase would significantly enhance the availability and accessibility of high-quality primary healthcare services for the most vulnerable sections of our population [15].

Despite the significance of primary healthcare to nations, their health systems, and local communities, it is clear that primary care as a career choice lacks prestige for physicians. This perception could be due to several factors, including potential lack of positive

exposure to primary care in undergraduate education, perceived low remuneration, and the unappealing requirement to work in rural and remote areas [16].

Indeed, strengthening primary healthcare in India requires a robust commitment from the government. This commitment should aim to provide accessible, affordable, and high-quality primary healthcare through a multidisciplinary team. This team should comprise medical professionals, public health professionals, community health workers, and nurse practitioners. [17,18].

Such an approach can ensure comprehensive healthcare coverage and significantly improve health outcomes across the country.

Indeed, the **National Health Protection Mission**, also known as **Ayushman Bharat Yojana**, is a significant step towards improving primary healthcare in India. Launched by the Indian government, this scheme aims to provide insurance coverage of up to 5 lakh rupees per family. It focuses on providing quality healthcare to the weaker sections of society.

The scheme also aims to enhance secondary and tertiary healthcare sectors. The government claims it to be the world's largest healthcare scheme. However, only time will tell the effectiveness and impact of this scheme.

It's important to note that such initiatives are crucial for ensuring equitable access to healthcare services, particularly for those in rural areas and the unorganized sector. They can help reduce the financial burden of healthcare on these vulnerable populations and improve overall health outcomes. However, the successful implementation of these schemes requires robust infrastructure, adequate funding, and efficient management.

Issues that should be addressed are

- **Biomedical issues** - This includes the management of chronic diseases and control of communicable diseases, including immunizations.
- **Behavioral issues** - Primary care plays a crucial role in helping individuals quit smoking and overcome other addictions. It also involves screening and other preventive activities.
- **Socio-environmental issues** - Primary care practitioners often deal with issues related to poverty, community development, and disaster response planning.
- **Access to healthcare for underserved or vulnerable populations** - Primary care is often the first point of contact for these populations, providing them with much-needed healthcare services.

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