Education

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Teaching primary health care: a comprehensive approach

The MEDEX Primary Health Care Series, an integrated training system for everyone in primary care, was published in 1983. It is now used in over 70 countries and has demonstrated its value in the developing world. The Series lays considerable emphasis on the crucial link between the performance of health workers and the management support with which they are provided.

Ten years of development and field testing resulted, in 1983, in the publication of the MEDEX Primary Health Care Series, an integrated training system of materials and methods for everyone in primary care, as described earlier (1). Today, the Series is used in over 70 countries and has demonstrated its value in strengthening primary care in the developing world.

Pragmatic solutions

Why is the Series so widely employed? Among the most important reasons is the fact that its development involved health centres and health workers associated with primary health care programmes in Guyana, Lesotho, Micronesia, Pakistan, and Thailand. The Series addresses everyday problems and provides pragmatic solutions that most primary health care programmes can apply. Its widespread use also owes something to the attention it gives to the development of skills in health workers. The Series uses a competency-based methodology, in contrast to the concentration on knowledge acquisition found in more conventional training programmes. In order to assist with the implementation or strengthening of competency-based training programmes at the middle level of the primary care system, it details activities for periods of as little as 15 minutes in courses lasting 6–15 months. In addition, a dialogic method of training is used for the more peripheral community health workers, who may not be literate.
Management link

The Series is among the first publications to emphasize and detail the crucial link between the performance of health personnel and the management support with which they are provided. Methods and materials designed to strengthen management infrastructures and operations are included. Because management plays such a critical role in every segment of development, the Series provides a systematic, practical approach to the management of primary health care.

The Series advocates disease prevention and health promotion and helps to train health workers to diagnose and treat the most common clinical problems. The analysis of responses in a survey of nearly 300 institutions or organizations using the technology shows the value of the Series in addressing important problems associated with the implementation of primary care (see figure).

The Series has been found useful in strengthening programmes as well as in starting new ones. The consistent format, facilitating local adaptation, has undoubtedly probably encouraged the growing use of the technology.

The 35 volumes of the Series are divided into three major components (1):

— systems development materials;
— training materials for middle-level health workers;
— training materials for community health workers.

The system interrelates important components of primary care implementation such as training and management at the district, health centre and community levels. This has made it comparatively flexible, and most programmes use it for more than one purpose. The materials on community health and maternal and child health are used more than the others, those relating to the latter field being by far the most popular.

Role of nurses

The Series is based on the realistic and pragmatic organization of health care delivery systems found in most countries. It places great importance on the use of health centre personnel to orientate and link resources at the centre to needs at the periphery. Health centre personnel at the middle level of the primary care delivery system, who are often nurses, fulfil an important role as trainers and supervisors of community health workers. Nurses constitute a large group of providers with a major role in the delivery of primary care, upon which the improvement of nursing skills will clearly have a long-term impact. With appropriate adaptation, the diagnostic, curative and community health skills covered in the Series are consistent with the expanding role of nursing in primary care.
A comprehensive approach to primary health care

Purposes for which the MEDEX Primary Health Care Series has been used by 293 institutions or organizations

The nursing profession in developing countries has responded favourably to the Series. Over 200 nursing programmes have shown interest in using it to assist them in tilting nursing curricula towards primary health care. The MEDEX Group is now coordinating its activities with Third World nursing leaders and has begun to help in strengthening primary care in nursing curricula by working through clusters of institutions at national and regional level.

To assist further development and the sharing of experiences, the Group has established the MEDEX International Network (MEDINET) of users of the Series. The Group’s bulletin, 2000, gives information on the use of the Series and on other matters relevant to primary health care development.

The Series is published in English and in 1987 a mini-MEDEX Series, covering areas of community health, maternal and child health, and health centre management was published in Spanish and distributed in Latin American countries for use in nursing and primary care programmes. There is also increasing interest in a French translation of a large part of the Series. Various sections have already been translated into 21 other languages including Chinese, Nepalese, Oriya, Portuguese, Sesotho, and Thai.

Funding for the development and dissemination of the Series has come mainly
from the United States Agency for International Development. The International Development and Research Centre (Canada), the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have made additional contributions. The commitment and perseverance of governments, ministries of health, and health personnel have been vitally important for the development, field testing and finalization of the Series.

The widespread use of the Series attests to the need for such a publication. With continued adaptation and use, it is proving of great value to most health professionals in respect of training and management requirements in primary health care.

Reference


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Said at the 41st World Health Assembly

*All for health*

*We have the knowledge and technology to prevent or cure most diseases of mankind—now we need concerted action by every woman, man and child, to protect and promote their own health by a healthy life-style.*

—Professor D. Ngandu-Kabeya (Zaire), President of the 41st World Health Assembly, on the occasion of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Declaration of Alma-Ata, 4 May 1988.

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