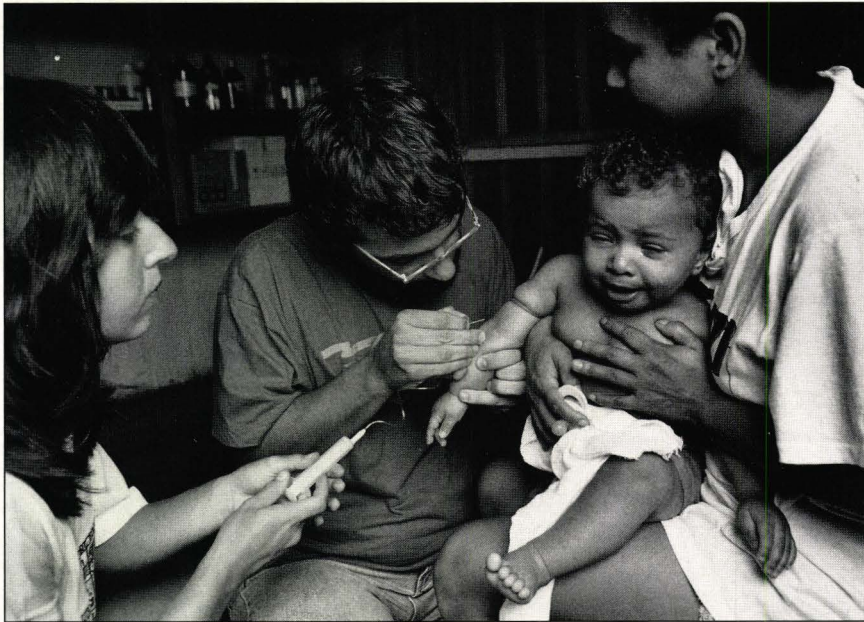


Frontline doctors of tomorrow

Charles Boelen



Excellence and accessibility will be the characteristics of tomorrow's doctors.

The challenges in the health field today can be stated in terms of the principles which must now guide our actions: (1) the need for health interventions to be relevant and of the highest quality, to be based on priorities, and to achieve the highest cost-effective results, and (2) the need for equitable access to health care for everyone.

Thanks to scientific and technological progress, various medical interventions promise to reduce suffering and prolong life, but their increasing cost sets limits on the choice of health care available and the way it is administered. At the same time, the users of health services are becoming better informed and more demanding.

To meet the challenges, in both affluent and developing countries, reforms to the health systems are under way or are being planned, and all health professionals must prepare themselves to play a fundamental

role in applying these reforms. Let us examine the role of "frontline" professionals, since they are closest to the users of health services.

Depending on the social, cultural and economic context and the state of the local health system, frontline health personnel may be village health workers, nurses, or general

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practitioners (family doctors). In future the latter will probably be more and more sought after, inasmuch as they seem capable of finding an adequate solution to most patients' health problems in ways that satisfy them while proving cost-effective from the point of view of the health system. However, these family doctors will have to learn to evolve within the health services so as to respond better to the challenges of the future.



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Five roles

The frontline health professionals will have five principal roles to play.

■ **Care-givers.** Besides giving individual treatment, frontline doctors must take into account the total (physical, mental and social) needs of the patient. They must ensure that a full range of treatment – curative, preventive or rehabilitative – will be dispensed in ways that are complementary, integrated and continuous. And they must ensure that the treatment is of the highest quality.

■ **Decision-makers.** In a climate of transparency the frontline doctor will have to take decisions that can be justified in terms of efficacy and cost. From all the possible ways of treating a given health condition, the one that seems most appropriate in the given situation must be chosen. As regards expenditure, the limited resources available for health must be shared out fairly to the benefit of every individual in the community.

■ **Communicators.** Lifestyle aspects such as a balanced diet, safety measures at work, type of leisure pursuits, respect for the environment and so on all have a determining influence on health. The involvement of the individual in protecting and restoring his or her own health is therefore vital, since exposure to a health risk is largely determined by one's behaviour. The doctors of tomorrow



Therapeutic decisions have to be both efficient and financially justifiable.

row must be excellent communicators in order to persuade individuals, families and the communities in their charge to adopt healthy lifestyles and become partners in the health effort.

■ **Community leaders.** The needs and problems of the whole community – in a suburb or a district – must not be forgotten. By understanding the determinants of health inherent in the physical and social environment and by appreciating the breadth of each problem or health risk, the frontline doctor will not simply be treating individuals who seek help but will also take a positive interest in community health activities which will benefit large numbers of people.

■ **Managers.** To carry out all these functions, it will be essential for the frontline doctors to acquire managerial skills. This will enable them to initiate exchanges of information in order to make better decisions, and to work within a multidisciplinary team in close association with other partners for health and social development. Both old and new methods of dispensing care will have to be integrated with the totality of health and social services, whether destined for the individual or for the community.

The ideal frontline doctor of the future might be described as “the five-star doctor” – someone who is equal in excellence to a five-star hotel or restaurant, but is accessible to everyone from the richest to the poorest. The skills of the doctors of tomorrow will serve the needs of all health systems and services; these abilities will be desirable to a certain degree in health personnel at every level.

Far from being a dream, these goals and skills must be seen as imperative for our doctors of tomorrow. ■

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The frontline doctor ensures a continuum of care, taking into account the family and social conditions of patients.



A health education session in Nepal. Doctors must be excellent communicators if they are to foster a partnership with families and communities.