

Delivering Competencies to Sri Lankan Health Care Workers in the era of Corona Virus Epidemic

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Received 21 September, 2020; **Accepted** 20 October, 2020; **Published** 25 October, 2020

Keywords: Covid-19; Healthcare delivery system; Healthcare workers; Sri Lanka; Epidemic

Novel Corona virus epidemic has posed multiple and novel challenges to almost all the health systems in the world, not only due to its' infectivity denoted by "superspreading" [1] and health system exhaustion [2], but also due to the employed preventive and control measures including social distancing. Social distancing made the physical presence of healthcare workers for the training programs, virtually impossible and practical, skill-based demonstrations, which could instil competencies more effectively, were not practically feasible invariably.

Being a novel disease with less information about its' epidemiology and transmission, Corona virus infection imposed further burden to the health system in relation to improving the competencies of health staff. Although studies revealed that majority had good knowledge and positive attitudes towards Corona virus infection [3-5], there was a minor proportion of healthcare workers, who were having lack of knowledge in relation to selected domains such as transmission and onset of symptoms [3], risk groups and testing [4] and transmission, isolation of suspected cases and the treatment [5]. However, this minority created a major risk of transmission of the virus among all staff and public due to their poor competencies. Additionally, the same studies revealed that despite having reliable sources of information in World Health Organization, Centres of Disease Control and relevant Ministries of Health, the majority of healthcare workers obtained the information mainly from social media, which can be unreliable and misleading [3-5].

These poor competencies among healthcare workers has led to delayed control efforts and further rapid spread, leading to risk the lives of patients as well as healthcare workers themselves [6]. Moreover, healthcare workers with more knowledge were more confident in managing corona virus cases, which can be an asset to any healthcare delivery system [7].

Therefore, delivering competencies through provision of reliable information for healthcare workers amidst the challenges can be a critical factor in achieving success in prevention and control of Corona virus epidemic. Alegbeleye and Mohammed, mentioned that poor knowledge of COVID-19 due its' recent discovery combined with profound existing knowledge gap, "capacity building is a must in the area of skill acquisition for effective care" [8].

Using online learning platforms have been utilized to instil competencies among health care workers for long time. A study done in 2010 in USA, revealed that there was a significant improvement in hand hygiene knowledge and compliance following online training programs and participants believed that the program was effective in instilling compliance behaviours [9].

Although, deemed unreliable, utilization of social media to gain knowledge during Corona virus epidemic even among developing countries such as Vietnam and Pakistan, was a positive indicator and favourable factor for using online learning platforms [3-5]. In this context, World Health Organization has also identified "utilizing online learning platforms and mobile technology to provide key training" to uplift the health workforce competencies amidst COVID-19 outbreak [10].

Sri Lanka has gained impressive achievements in relation to prevention and control of Corona virus epidemic amidst the same global challenges, with mere 13 deaths and approximately 3,000 cases. One of the main strategies implemented by the Medical Services Branch of Ministry of Health, was in relation instil competencies among healthcare workers on Corona virus infection through online learning strategies. In the process, selected healthcare institutions were asked to assign "COVID-19 Training Focal Points" and they were requested to provide COVID-19 training needs for the rapid training need analysis. Subsequently, 9 training sessions including "orientation to the online training" were formulated with the collaboration of National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Medical Research Institute, professional colleges such as Ceylon College of Physicians, Sri Lankan College of Microbiologists, and World Health Organization for the prioritized training needs. Online training platforms were designed based on Google Classroom® and delivered over 6 weeks to achieve approximately 20,000 "health care worker – training program" combinations. Currently, training evaluations are underway to assess the effectiveness of the training. The success of these delivered online training programs can be used as an example for other resource poor settings and in similar diseases outbreaks as well, for instilling competencies among healthcare workers.

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Cite this article: P.V.D.S. Dharmagunawardene. Delivering Competencies to Sri Lankan Health Care Workers in the era of Corona Virus Epidemic. *Prim Health Care*, 2020, 10(5), e-129.