

Medical Diplomacy

Dr DC Joshi, MD

“The most important thing is caring, so do it first, for the caring Physician best inspires hope and trust.”
.....Sir William Osler

Submitted: 25-09-2021

Revised: 01-10-2021

Accepted: 05-10-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

Medical diplomacy is a form of diplomatic relations that is meant to sponsor positive relations between nations while also providing needed health services. It is believed that this type of diplomacy facilitates easing tensions between nations. It also establishes a positive image for the nation for sending doctors and other needed personnel in times of need. It is part of a larger framework of foreign relations which is sometimes referred to as compassionate diplomacy.

Many countries around the world struggle to provide the required health services to their citizens, particularly after natural disasters and emergencies. In some instances, a country's health care budget is so depleted that it is barely sufficient to maintain minimal clinics, and may not be able to provide basic necessary medication and medical facilities to patients. Many organizations around the world such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent and Doctors Without Borders travel or donate to these countries to improve medical condition

CONCEPT AS A WHOLE

In medical diplomacy, a nation sends doctors, equipment, supplies, and other personnel to another nation in need. In some cases, these compassionate missions may be brief, particularly when a country sends doctors to the site of an earthquake. In other instances, medical diplomacy is a long term effort which is designed to have a lasting impact on the host nation. In such cases, the team may include people to train new medical professionals, build medical facilities, and educate the general populace of the host nation on health related issues.

In many cases, doctors and staff volunteer for medical diplomacy missions. The self-sacrificing attitudes of these individuals can send a powerful message to the host nation. When a country has a reputation for riding roughshod in its foreign relations, the individual actions of citizens reaching out to people in need can greatly help to

change that image. Staff on a medical diplomacy mission may face and endure very harsh conditions, but they persevere because they are committed to good health for all citizens, to ameliorate global relations.

The establishment of medical training facilities is a big part of medical diplomacy, as is provision of needed surgery, medications, and vaccines. In addition, many countries get involved with assisting other nations by establishing preventive healthcare programs and education. Successful medical diplomacy demands a large and well coordinated team, along with excellent communication between the host nation and the nation sending out the diplomatic mission. Ultimately, it is intended to win hearts and minds through compassion and care, rather than with brute force such as war or complex foreign aid terms.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Doctors without Borders, or Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), as it is more fondly known throughout the world, is a charitable organization that despatches doctors to poor countries, war torn regions, and disaster areas to provide medical assistance to those suffering. The organization began in 1971 with a group of French doctors who felt the dire need for more medical expertise in countries with little money or experience. They have assisted people in numerous charitable ways. Its first mission was providing humanitarian and medical aid to victims of the 1972 earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua. The group has also been recognized for its extraordinary contributions by winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999.

In addition to providing emergency medical care after natural disasters, Doctors without Borders has often intervened to help victims in areas where war or genocide has affected humanity. MSF organized refugee camp medical centers for Cambodians fleeing to Thailand in 1975. It also assisted in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War. In the

1990s, in addition to providing medical assistance, the organization began to actively campaign for providing supplies of medication, vaccinations, and basic medical kits to countries where little medical help exists for majority of the population. They also trained local medical staff and health education to provide better sanitation in hospitals in numerous countries.

Doctors Without Borders is non-sectarian, and therefore doesn't take sides in treating patients. Clinics will treat any person in dire need of medical care. Yet, despite their efforts, many people still go without medical care, especially for rare medical conditions. In some cases, it has set up special medical missions, with specialist physicians to treat congenital disorders like heart defects. Often, the humanitarian aid has to be restricted to inadequate funding and a limited supply of doctors to treat a vast number of people with disease or injury.

THRUST AREAS

Health Systems Strengthening

Medical diplomacy strives to make high quality health care available to people around the globe. Through training, technical assistance, and expert mentoring one can build capacity and skills at all levels of the health care system. It is essential to work in close cooperation with local governments, health officials, and other public and private partners to identify their needs and implement long lasting solutions. By using "train the trainer", model, the health professionals can be trained to innovate health care facilities and strengthen logistical support for the distribution of vaccines.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

Right from responding to natural disasters to supplying health facilities to implementing programs, Humanitarian Assistance programs work worldwide to provide resources where they are needed most. The strategy should be to provide emergency support leading to long-term health benefits, addressing gaps and needs. Emergency missions should be undertaken to provide medical care to people who need it the most. Knowledge and skills of local providers needs to be updated, to provide help to rehabilitate health facilities, and provide essential medicines and supplies. An integral part of the programme should be to promote high quality health care around the world and supply much needed medical equipment and pharmaceuticals. The supply chain management team should be competent to handle the receipt,

warehousing and distribution of these commodities using state-of-the-art technology and systems.

Infectious Diseases

Despite much progress, Infectious Diseases such as Tuberculosis (TB) or HIV still threaten the lives and well-being of millions of people around the world. Infectious disease programs should be targeted to suit the needs of the country and community at large. Treatment approach to TB management and HIV prevention & treatment focuses on strengthening the health care system as a whole, including improving access to quality laboratory services. By building the capacity of health care workers at both national and community levels, the ability of countries to provide quality diagnosis and treatment using the latest techniques can be strengthened. HIV work must be focussed on prevention and care of orphans and vulnerable children, strengthening the capability of caregivers & guardians with parenting education and economic strengthening so they can cater to the needs of the needs of all children under their care.

Non communicable Diseases

Rapidly growing risks of chronic disease and life style diseases worldwide - particularly obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease needs to be addressed on priority. The approach should focus on capacity building of health professionals, health care workers, peers, and individuals to prevent, diagnose, and effectively manage their diseases. The skills of health care professionals should be augmented at all levels, and the community be sensitised to promote healthy lifestyles including educating the public.

Women's and Children's Health

The health of women and children assumes prime importance and is at the core of all health initiatives. Each year, nearly 7 million children under 5 years of age die from diseases, while over 500,000 women die in childbirth annually. The program should focus on the importance of teaching mothers and caregivers on proper prenatal care, ways and means to keep infants and children healthy, and importance of early diagnosis and treatment. Medical diplomacy also aims at economic strengthening of women to facilitate paying for costs associated with health and the well-being of orphans and vulnerable children.

Water and health initiative

Adequate supply of fresh (clean and uncontaminated) water is essential for individual and public health. It is central to living a life in dignity and upholding human rights. Unfortunately, over half of the world's population does not have access to clean potable water, and even in those places where there is an abundance of fresh water, its pollution and other negative forces threaten it. The following basic considerations need to be focussed upon while taking clean water initiative:-

- (a) Water-borne diseases account for a large proportion of mortality and morbidity, especially in developing countries. These problems get accentuated in times of disasters such as wars, nuclear and man-made accidents with oil and/or chemicals, earthquakes, epidemics, droughts and floods.
- (b) Anthropogenic changes to ecosystems, lowered retention by the earth's surface, and the limitation of the inherent capacity of nature to filter dirt from the water are causing increasing damage to the natural environment, especially the water environment.
- (c) Water has been converted to a commodity, whereby it is provided for profit rather than as a public service. This has adversely impacted access to an adequate supply of drinking water.
- (d) The development of sustainable infrastructure for the provision of safe water contributes greatly to good public health and national well-being. Curtailing infectious diseases and other ailments that are caused by unsafe water alleviates the burden of health care costs and improves productivity. This creates a positive ripple effect on national economies.
- (e) Water as a vital and necessary resource for life has become scarce in many parts of the world and therefore has to be used reasonably and with care. Wastage of water needs to be minimised on priority.
- (f) Water is an asset that is shared by humanity and the earth. Hence, the global community should address water-related issues collaboratively.

REGIONS OF INTEREST FOR MEDICAL DIPLOMACY

Africa

Medical programs in Africa focus on the continuing AIDS pandemic and its devastating impact on families, tuberculosis control, humanitarian assistance and the growing need for chronic disease education and prevention.

SE Asia and Middle East

Perhaps no other region is as diverse culturally, economically or in terms of religion as the Southeast Asia and Middle East region. Yet in spite of their cultural differences, each country faces similar health threats. Health of women & children, childhood cancers and infectious & chronic diseases has been identified as important health issues to be confronted in this region.

II. CONCLUSION

Global threats of communicable and non-communicable disease persist, despite unparalleled progress in biomedical science, public health and medical care. Barriers to good medical care flourish, created by ineffective, inefficient, and sometimes even corrupt governments. The public is confused and distrustful of new systems of care. The new terminology offers providers in place of professionals, customers instead of patients, and health care instead of medical care. To add to this agony is the pollution of scientific information by media and distortion by legal and regulatory systems. The goal of the Caring Physicians of the World Initiative is to restore enthusiasm and optimism in the field of medicine, through medical and social leadership based on the medical traditions of Caring, Ethics and Science which offers beam of hope in achieving positive health for our society.