

The Role of Young Doctors' Health Parliament as an effective policy tool in Tackling NCDs: An innovative approach

Venkatesh Karthikeyan¹, Omprakash Bera², Chandan Kumar³, Krupal Joshi⁴, U Venkatesh⁵, Anirban Dalui⁶, Hariharan V S⁷, Abul Hasan K M⁸, Shiva Prakash Srinivasan⁹

¹Department of Community & Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Patna, Bihar

²Regional Advisor (Asia) for Non-Communicable Diseases, Global Health Advocacy Incubator

³Chairman, The Vinayaka Hospital and Research Centre, Ranchi, Jharkhand

⁴Department of Community & Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rajkot, Gujarat

⁵Department of Community & Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

⁶Department of Community Medicine, Barasat Government Medical College, West Bengal

⁷Chairman, Indian Medical Association – Junior Doctors' Network, Tamilnadu

⁸President, Indian Medical Association, Tamilnadu

⁹Consultant Psychiatrist, Department of Youth Mental Health, Schizophrenia Research Foundation, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Dr Venkatesh Karthikeyan, Senior Resident, Department of Community and Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Phulwari Sharif, Patna, Bihar – 801507

Email: 4852012@gmail.com

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Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are increasingly recognized as a severe public health concern threatening the human race, development, and quality of life. In the last three decades, Years of healthy life lost due to disability (YLD) has witnessed a significant shift from Communicable diseases towards NCDs and injuries (1). Globally, the economic burden of NCDs is projected to rise to over 13 trillion dollars by the year 2030, and every 10% hike in NCDs is expected to cause a 0.5% decline in global economic growth(2). The poor and disadvantaged population is disproportionately affected by NCDs, contributing to increased health disparities within and between nations (3). In low- and middle-income countries like India, NCDs are expected to diminish their GDP by 1% to 5%

annually(3). The novel concept of the Young Doctors' Health Parliament (YDHP) is uniquely positioned to leverage the fresh perspectives and energetic engagement of young medical professionals who are at the forefront of encountering and managing NCDs. This article explores how the Young Doctors' Health Parliament serves as a pivotal mechanism for young doctors to influence health policy, thereby playing a crucial role in mitigating the NCD burden that disproportionately affects their peers and younger generations.

THE RISING TIDE OF NCDs

The impact of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) on global health is profound and escalating. It has been estimated that NCDs account for 80.6% of Years of healthy life lost

due to disability (YLD) as against YLD due to a combination of communicable, neonatal, maternal, and nutritional causes(4). NCDs are responsible for 74% of deaths across the globe, accounting for 41 million deaths every year(5). They are gaining wider attention as they result in 17 million deaths every year globally among people aged less than 70, and the data projections clearly show that the NCD burden will worsen with time(5). About 80% of all premature NCD deaths are due to cardiovascular diseases (17.9 million deaths/year), cancers (9.3 million deaths/year), respiratory diseases (4.1 million deaths/year), and diabetes (1.5 million deaths/year)(6).

The World Health Organization has estimated that Low-and Middle-Income countries (LMICs) contribute to 77% of all NCD deaths(7). Being one of the LMICs, India also struggles with a large number of NCD-affected populations, and it has been estimated that NCDs are responsible for 63% of deaths in the Indian subcontinent(4). The increase in Disease Adjusted Life Years (DALY) due to NCDs, from 30% in 1990 to 55% in 2016, further illustrates the escalating health crisis, with one in four Indians at risk of dying from an NCD before the age of 70(8). While the overarching statistics on NCDs are alarming, and there is an urgent need for targeted health interventions, it is crucial to also focus on less frequently discussed but vital aspects such as mental health, protecting youth from smoking, and healthy food policy. These elements, which are often overshadowed by broader NCD concerns, are given significant attention in our article to highlight their importance in the comprehensive management and prevention of NCDs.

HYPERTENSION AND YOUTH

Hypertension, often termed the "silent killer," is increasingly prevalent among the youth, posing significant public health concerns. Recent studies indicate a worrying rise in hypertension rates among young adults, attributed to factors such as sedentary lifestyles, poor dietary habits, and high-stress levels(9). The National Family Health Survey

(NFHS-5) revealed that 24% of men and 21.3% of women aged 15-49 years in India have elevated blood pressure or are on antihypertensive medication (10). Early-onset hypertension is associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and kidney failure later in life, making early detection and management crucial (11). Moreover, lifestyle interventions, including increased physical activity, dietary modifications to reduce salt intake, and stress management techniques, have effectively controlled the youth's blood pressure(12). Addressing hypertension in young populations through targeted public health strategies and education is essential to curb the long-term health and economic burdens associated with hypertension.

DIABETES AND YOUTH

The prevalence of diabetes among youth is rising at an alarming rate, driven by factors such as sedentary lifestyles, poor dietary habits, and increasing obesity rates. Type 2 diabetes, once considered an adult-onset disease, is now frequently diagnosed in younger populations, posing severe long-term health risks. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reports that 15.6% of men and 13.5% of women aged 15-49 years in India have elevated blood sugar levels or are on medication for diabetes management(10). Early-onset diabetes heightens the risk of future cardiovascular disease, kidney failure, and nerve damage, underscoring the need for early intervention(13). Young doctors play a pivotal role in diabetes prevention, providing essential guidance and support to young patients, crucial for managing and preventing this chronic condition.

NCDs AND MENTAL HEALTH

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health are intricately connected, presenting a dual burden that disproportionately impacts the younger population. Studies consistently show that mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and stress-related conditions can significantly elevate the risk for chronic physical illnesses, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and respiratory

disorders(14). On the other end of the spectrum, the presence of chronic physical diseases often predisposes individuals to mental health challenges due to the ongoing stress and psychological strain of managing a long-term illness(15). This bidirectional relationship underscores the critical role of youth in healthcare, highlighting the need for an integrated approach that not only focuses on treatment but also emphasizes the prevention of both physical and mental health conditions. Young individuals, often at the forefront of adopting new technologies and social movements, are uniquely positioned to drive innovative solutions within healthcare. As emerging medical field leaders, young doctors play an instrumental role in this dynamic, bringing fresh perspectives and energy to developing and implementing health strategies that effectively intertwine mental and physical health services. Effective management of this intertwined health burden requires comprehensive strategies that incorporate mental health services into the broader NCD care frameworks, with youth playing a crucial role in shaping these initiatives and advocating for holistic health policies.

SMOKE AND YOUTH

The intersection of youth and substance use, mainly smoking, poses a significant public health challenge that demands focused attention. Previous literature shows that one-third of young individuals are engaged in substance use, with a substantial majority initiating such behaviors before completing adolescence(16). Therefore, it is crucial to concentrate efforts on young populations to prevent the onset and escalation of smoking. Implementing comprehensive educational programs that sensitize young people about the health risks associated with tobacco use, alongside strategies that promote resilience against peer pressure, is crucial(17). Additionally, enhancing regulations to restrict youth access to tobacco products, particularly in high-risk areas, is essential for reducing smoking rates among this age group. Community-based interventions that foster supportive environments and healthy

behaviours can further deter youth from starting to smoke. Young doctors play a pivotal role in this effort, as they are often positioned as relatable role models who can effectively communicate the risks of smoking and advocate for robust anti-smoking policies. Therefore, a multifaceted approach involving education, regulation, and community support is vital for addressing the smoking epidemic among young populations.

HEALTHY FOOD POLICY AND YOUTH INTERACTION

The consumption of processed and packaged food has surged among youth due to increased professional commitments, reduced time for meal preparation, and the easy availability of convenience foods. This dietary shift has led to higher intake of sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, contributing to the rise of NCDs among young people(18). Front-of-package labelling (FOPL) is an effective policy tool to address this issue by providing clear, concise information on the levels of these three harmful nutrients(19). Highlighting high sugar, salt, and fat content on food labels can warn young consumers about potential health risks and guide them towards healthier choices. Research indicates that FOPL reduces the intake of unhealthy nutrients and encourages manufacturers to reformulate their products to meet healthier standards(20). By incorporating FOPL into national health policies, governments can protect the youth from the adverse effects of poor dietary choices, promoting a more health-conscious generation. Young doctors, who often interact directly with the public and patients in educational and clinical settings, play an essential role in advocating for and educating about the benefits of FOPL.

YOUNG DOCTORS' HEALTH PARLIAMENT – A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The Young Doctors' Health Parliament is an innovative concept designed to engage and empower young medical professionals, enabling them to shape health policies and address community health challenges actively. This initiative aims to sensitize young doctors to crucial health issues and policy debates, facilitating the conversion of their ideas into actionable policy recommendations aligned

with various stakeholders' needs. By fostering a collaborative environment where young doctors can share insights and propose solutions, the parliament strives to generate feasible and impactful recommendations that can be implemented to improve health outcomes across communities. This platform not only enhances the policy-making capacity of young doctors but also ensures that their voices are influential in the broader healthcare landscape.

The inaugural session of the Young Doctors' Health Parliament in Chennai on Apr 14, 2024 marked a significant milestone in the collective effort to address health challenges through youthful vigour and expert collaboration. Organized by the Indian Medical Association's Junior Doctors Network (IMA JDN), this event showcased the power of young medical professionals coming together to shape the future of healthcare policy and practice. Distinguished speakers from prestigious institutions such as the Indian Council of Medical Research, various All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and Global Health Advocacy Incubator emphasized the role of young doctors in managing and researching NCDs, among other pressing health issues.

The event was highlighted by a dynamic panel discussion, which allowed for an exchange of innovative ideas and practical solutions tailored to the needs of the community. This panel not only facilitated a dialogue among emerging healthcare leaders but also set the stage for actionable policy recommendations aimed at improving health outcomes nationwide. The Young Doctors' Health Parliament thus stood as a beacon of progress, underscoring young doctors' crucial role in driving forward impactful and sustainable health initiatives, paving the way for a healthier future.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As we delve into the discussions and outcomes of the YDHP, it becomes evident that this initiative is not just about addressing today's challenges but about anticipating tomorrow's health landscape. It underscores the

imperative for early intervention, strategic advocacy, and sustained action to turn the tide against NCDs, making the role of young doctors more crucial than ever.

The Young Doctors' Health Parliament exemplifies a significant step forward in the fight against critical public health challenges, not restricting only to NCDs. By focusing on the unique position of young doctors to advocate for and implement change, the YDHP is not only a catalyst for health policy innovation but also a ray of hope for healthier generations to come. This initiative exemplifies how strategic collaboration and youthful dynamism can lead to impactful health outcomes, making it a model worthy of replication across the globe.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

The first author was pivotal in leading the manuscript writing and revisions. The second author played a key role in conceptualizing the study. The third author provided substantial input in editing. The fourth, fifth, sixth and ninth authors provided technical inputs necessary for developing the manuscript. The seventh and eighth authors extended administrative support and played a critical role in successfully implementing the concept.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 4 (developed by OpenAI) in order to avail language suggestions and initial content draft. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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