



**Short Review Paper**

## **Social factors key determinants in disease outbreaks, a telling pointer to professionalize community interventions**

**N.S. Ramesh Chandran**

Department of Social Work, National College, Thiruvananthapuram, India  
nsrameshchandran@gmail.com

**Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)**

Received 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020, revised 16<sup>th</sup> October 2020, accepted 25<sup>th</sup> November 2020

### **Abstract**

*The epidemiology of a large number of endemics and diseases evidently shows that social factors are key determinants, which deserve to be viewed seriously. It is a telling pointer for social workers to augment and strengthen expertise in: dealing with public health issues most methodically, developing social protocols to assist health care professionals in outbreak management and morbidity surveillance, designing community intervention strategies by integrating the services of Government Agencies and Non Governmental Organizations, examining social determinants of communicable diseases to frame evidence based interventions, putting up a comprehensive blueprint to address health inequities and disseminating health literacy programmes. A mechanism like the single-window system devised for consolidating, coordinating and standardizing service delivery of NGOs, docked with the support of a Surveillance Council constituted for developing relevant insights and intervention strategies would help the community curb disease outbreaks significantly. A road map developed on the basis of community profile would serve as a good tool to keep tabs on social determinants for checking health inequities to a large extent. Effective communication builds up a strong network of professional contacts with Community Members, Health Care Providers, Media, Local Administration and NGOs. Networking is an amazing technique to invoke the cooperation and compliance of community members in translating key instructions into virtual action, which does demand professionalism and training. Social Workers should be well versed in manning risk communication during disease outbreaks. The growth of evidence based interventions depends a lot on the development of communication tools and strategies, particularly during health emergencies. The more and more professionalism is incorporated in interventions the more and more the community benefits.*

**Keywords:** Epidemiology, determinants, morbidity, surveillance, outbreaks.

### **Introduction**

The epidemiology of a large number of endemics and diseases evidently shows that social factors are key determinants, which deserve to be viewed seriously. The fact of the matter is that Professionals, Academics and Administrators until the outbreak of COVID 19, had not given the kind of importance social attributes ought to be looked into. The cataclysm erupted from corona virus has eventually opened the eyes of the world apropos of social dimensions of a pandemic.

It is a telling pointer for social workers to augment and strengthen expertise in: dealing with public health issues most methodically, developing social protocols to assist health care professionals in outbreak management and morbidity surveillance, designing community intervention strategies by integrating the services of Government Agencies and Non Governmental Organizations, examining social determinants of communicable diseases to frame evidence based interventions, putting up a comprehensive blueprint to address health inequities and disseminating health literacy programmes.

“Infectious disease epidemiologists have long recognised the importance of social variables as drivers of epidemics and disease risk, yet few apply analytic approaches from social epidemiology”<sup>1</sup>. Social intervention, to be more precise, focuses on two broad domains. i. Contain, Control, Curtail and Eradicate ii. Precaution, Prevention and Protection.

The existing macro level method of social work per se is too inadequate to meet the current challenges rewardingly. A new paradigm of community intervention interlacing technology, social media, empowerment, education, exercitations in social thinking, protocol management, priority setting and resource mobilization should be devised to address social issues of infectious and contagious diseases. More important is to frame suitable tools for implementing the contemplated programmes tangibly. In the changed contexts it is obligatory that social work education incorporates insights of social epidemiology to kick off social interventions pragmatically in the matter of disease outbreaks. It is desirable that concrete training modules in the domain of social epidemiology are included in the practicum of Social Work students so that the trainees would get an exposure of working on social attributes that influence and

impact health care system. Orientation offered to social work practitioners helps them identify and isolate bio-social factors to spotlight on health inequities and outbreak management.

### **Constitution of Surveillance Council flanked by a single window system**

Non Governmental Organizations play a decisive role in harnessing the social issues responsible for the causation of many diseases and disabilities. But the services provided by a large number of organizations are scattered, multifaceted, incongruous and often in fructuous. As long as these services are not consolidated, coordinated, channelized, appropriately directed, professionalized and delivered uniformly they no more turn out to become community intervention. Constituting a single window system for the purpose would be an excellent idea. Coherence and synchronization of services from all possible quarters would go a long way in manning outbreak management. A mechanism may be devised to pool the services of NGOs for developing right insights and intervention strategies by constituting a surveillance council flanked by a single window system for dissemination of relevant information, instructions, messages and unified strategies. The surveillance council comprising Social Work Pundits, Practitioners, Health care Providers, Public Health officials and representatives of LSG (Local Self Government) may guide, coordinate and oversee the activities of Government Agencies as well as NGOs. Such a modus operandi adopted for community intervention would enable to bring out convincing health outcomes.

One of the major tasks of NGOs working in community development is to closely watch the epidemiological conditions of diseases prevailing in their respective areas and collect relevant data for transmission to authorized health care professionals for expert scrutiny. Collaborating with local Health Centres to initiate preventive steps is another responsibility of the NGOs. These activities do demand higher level of professionalism and training. The single window system envisioned would help the Agencies standardize and deliver services qualitatively.

Social work professionals working with NGOs are not well versed in social epidemiology. Hence it is imperative that social work education takes care of this deficit by updating the curriculum. "Social epidemiology is a branch of epidemiology that focuses particularly on the effects of social-structural factors on states of health. Social epidemiology assumes that the distribution of advantages and disadvantages in a society reflects the distribution of health and disease. It proposes to identify societal characteristics that affect the pattern of disease and health distribution in a society and to understand its mechanisms"<sup>2</sup>.

Proactive role on the part of Social work professionals and researchers is peremptory to generate indigenous knowledge, collect socio-demographic data and analyze social contexts for

formulating reliable social insights and inputs about communicable diseases. Such reports would be able to provide credible data basis for helping health care professionals develop the right kind of expertise.

Local Self Governments may need to tie-up with nearby schools of social work to mobilize as much data as possible for developing the idea of KYN – Know Your Neighbourhood. The Local Administration can make use of the training of Social Work students for survey, assessment, analysis of data etc, which are supervised by the Faculty. The LSGs thereby do avail themselves of professionalism, knowledge and expertise in augmenting data basis. Keeping a vigil over changing social factors of infectious/contagious diseases is imperative to look into the health needs of local community. It is also ideal that the State Governments take the initiative of forming a Social Data Bank with a research wing attached to it. Analytic information about social determinants of disease outbreaks made available to the Health Department and Indian Medical Association would be instrumental in addressing health issues and health inequities to a great extent. The concept of Social Data Bank helps identify risk dimensions of endemics/pandemics and mobilize medical resources, if scrutinized seriously.

It is mandatory that Government Agencies and NGOs involved in community intervention synergize their activities for supporting health care providers to work upon health outcomes. A mechanism like the single-window system for standardizing service delivery, working concomitantly with Surveillance Council would not only help the community curb disease outbreaks but also build up the health of people significantly.

### **Surveillance of health determinants to check health inequities**

The definition given by WHO shows that "The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life." Family circumstances, economic conditions, cultural background, schooling facilities, psycho social factors, behavioural patterns and body constitutions are components of social determinants, which draw out a defining trajectory through which health inequities crystallize in society.

How to harness social determinants of health for ensuring health equity is not just the look out of health care providers nor the singular responsibility of the Health Department. Coordination of Government Departments coupled with the services of a multidisciplinary team including Social Work Professionals is necessary to engineer the activities for providing ideal health care services. Rio Political Declaration, 2011(2), WHO points out that health equity is a shared responsibility.

A road map based on community profile, developed by Social workers involved in community empowerment would serve as a good tool to keep tabs on health determinants, whereby health

inequities to a large extent can be checked. One of the advantages of maintaining community profile is that the Local Administration would be able to assess the socio demographic characteristics of the neighboring areas besides tracking health issues of vulnerable population. Needless to say that poverty, unhygienic conditions and poor sanitation are the greatest health challenges of a society. Any formula worked out for containing a disease outbreak becomes successful only if the aforesaid social factors are efficiently dealt with. Make use of modern computing technologies to collect, compile, and process information for developing a rich and key data base. Document the whole process and work jointly with health care providers for preparing public health reports, which may be submitted to policy makers for initiating further action.

Seventy percent of health determinants, as given to understand from the reports of WHO, constitute social factors. It is a clarion call for sound social intervention which is also a wakeup call for erudite social work professionals.

### **Effective communication the soul of community intervention**

Effective communication is not simply sending a few messages or disseminating vital information. The question is to build up a strong network of professional contacts with Community Members, Health Care Providers, Media, Local Administration and NGOs. Networking is an amazing technique to invoke the cooperation and compliance of community members in translating key instructions into virtual action. No campaign would be able to bring out a successful outcome sans effective communication. "A health campaign follows a specific sequence that moves the target audience from awareness of an issue towards a behaviour resulting in a specific health outcome. An effective campaign must also adapt to, and consider the context of, the community it serves"<sup>3</sup>. Enlightenment, Education and Empowerment are the triple cannons of healthy communication. In a pandemic-like situation, a communication strategy is very much essential for surveillance and for handling crisis management. "Communication with the public, stakeholders, within the health system, schools, and numerous others during a public health emergency is critical to managing any crisis. Communication strategies designed in advance to deal with possible scenarios detail objectives, target audiences, key messages, tool or channels and action plans"<sup>4</sup>.

A lot rests with risk communication during disease outbreaks. A good tool invariably makes risk communication all the more successful. "Risk communication is one of the key pillars of response to outbreaks. It refers to the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between health experts or officials and people who face a threat (hazard) to their survival, health or economic or social well-being. Its ultimate goal is that everyone at risk is able to take informed decisions to mitigate the effects a disease outbreak and take protective and preventive action"<sup>5</sup>. Social environment, public health, political scenario

and target groups are major components while framing well organized communication strategies.

The growth of evidence based interventions depends a lot on the development of communication tools and strategies, particularly during health emergencies. Strangely effective communication still has not emerged as a core course of study in social work education; rather it is taught as one of the components of life skill management. That is not enough. It's high time the academics gave more space for specific and professional communication strategies in pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

Community intervention is a specific domain within a broad frame work of social empowerment. The competence of non-professionals with casual training cannot be taken for granted in harnessing social determinants of health issues. As such the roles and responsibilities of Anganwadi Workers, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) Workers, Midwives or Lady Health Visitors who work at base level are very much limited towards this end. But their services are indeed supportive in addressing health issues. Tasks like collecting, compiling, analyzing and processing social data, assessing and prioritizing needs, organizing health campaigns, identifying resources etc, cannot be expected from community workers engaged at grassroots level because they do demand a lot of expertise.

Notwithstanding the enormous growth of social work education in our country, the question as to why Social Workers are awfully underused in community health work, is indeed a matter of deep concern! The more and more professionalism is incorporated in interventions the more and more the community benefits.

### **References**

1. Grace A Noppert, John T Kubale, and Mark L Wilson, (2017). Analyses of infectious disease patterns and drivers largely lack insights from social epidemiology: contemporary patterns and future opportunities. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 71(4), 350-355
2. Kaori Honjo (2004). Social epidemiology: Definition, history, and research examples. *Environmental health and preventive medicine*, 9(5), 193-199. doi:10.1007/BF02898100
3. WHO (2011). WHO strategic communications frame work for effective communications. [www.who.int › mediacentre › communication-framework](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/communication-framework/),
4. WHO (2009). Pan American Health Organization, Regional office of the, Creating a communication strategy for pandemic influenza. [www.paho.org › PAHO\\_ Comm Strategy\\_Eng](http://www.paho.org/PAHO_CommStrategy_Eng)

5. WHO (2018). Part I: Epidemics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hand book Managing Epidemics.
6. David E. Bloom and Daniel Cadarette (2019). Infectious Disease Threats in the Twenty-First Century: Strengthening the Global Response. *Frontiers in Immunology*, doi:10.3389/fimmu.2019.00549
7. Sandra Crouse Quinn and Supriya Kumar (2014). Health Inequalities and Infectious Disease Epidemics: A Challenge for Global Health Security, Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy. *Practice, and Science*, 12(5), 263–273.
8. Rio Political Declaration (2011). Social determinants of health discussion. Evaluating intersectoral processes for action on the social determinants of health: learning from key informants, World Health Organization
9. Erik Blas and Anand Sivasankara Kurup (2010). Equity, social determinants and public health programmes edited by Erik Blas and Anand Sivasankara Kurup. World Health Organization, apps.who.int › bitstream › handle › 9789241563970\_eng