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Book Reviews

The Role of Health Centres in the Development of Urban Health Systems. Report of a WHO Study Group on Primary Health Care in Urban Areas

WHO Technical Report Series, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1992
38 pp., ISBN 92-4-120827-9, Sw.fr.7.-

The role of health centres in the development of urban health systems has been discussed by a WHO study group on primary health care in urban areas in December 1991. The aim of the study group was 'to advise the Director-General of WHO on ways of enhancing the role of health centres in the development of equitable urban health systems through the application of primary health care principles'.

The study group assessed the current stage of development of urban health centres as the operational modules for the implementation of health for all in urban areas. Special attention was given to the potential contribution of health centres to the effective delivery of the elements of primary health care.

The report stressed that most health districts need a local reference point. At least one health centre in each district with a sizeable population should be upgraded to a 'reference health centre'. These reference centres should relieve the pressure on hospital services, they should provide comprehensive general health care including for instance provision of inpatient care of patients requiring a bed for less than 24 h, social welfare, education and environmental health.

Furthermore, it was stressed that public health interventions dealing with the so-called existing health crisis in the world's cities should have two primary components: an analysis of health needs and these needs must be set against the ability to develop activities.

For that matter both the starting points mentioned above and the description of health needs and possible (primary health care) activities in the first part of the report are presented in a rough abstract way. The views expressed all look worth while but no arguments are given for choices which have been made. (For instance, both the central role and the tasks of reference health centres distinguished, are not well reasoned.)

The next part of the report deals with key issues and experience in the organization of urban health systems. Among others it is said that one of the difficulties in obtaining political commitment to tackling the problems of the urban poor is that often there is little awareness of their conditions. This seems rather naive. Often the awareness is present, but awareness alone seldom leads to appropriate action. However, the importance of local level epidemiology and health promotion stressed later on is still right. Furthermore the reorientation of services and more specific the role of the district health system is discussed on the basis of four factors: access, quality, financing and accountability. The remaining large part of the paper is addressed to the development of reference health centres. Experiences of reorienting urban health systems in different countries are described. For three cities more detailed information is given: Cali (Columbia), Manila (The Philippines) and Newark, New Jersey (USA). Again, the descriptions are rough abstract, which of course is inevitable in a world-wide comparison. Still, some creative initiatives are mentioned. The study group draws a number of general conclusions. Further recommendations are made to national and local administrations and health authorities, and to WHO.

The report is useful in stressing the possible important role of health centres to these local and national governments and health authorities. For representatives of these bodies and for (other) policy makers this report is worth while. The same holds true for others who, in general terms, are interested in the subject of the report. However it must be clear that the report does not give more than a rough, general overview.

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