



EMPOWERING FRONTLINE HEALTH WORKERS TO MANAGE DISASTERS AT VILLAGE LEVEL: A LESSON FROM MYSURU, KARNATAKA

Community Medicine

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KEYWORDS

Sir,

The evidence and statistical data are rich enough to confirm the changes in global climate which has led to devastating effects on human health.¹ An increase in the occurrence of natural disasters is being attributed to the climate change.² India is vulnerable to many natural disasters due to its unique geological and climatic characteristics. The country has witnessed manmade disasters of varying intensities from time to time.³ As the incidence of disasters and the number of people residing in disaster-prone areas are increasing substantially, the public health system has to arrive at sustainable solutions to increase the preparedness and manage the emergencies efficiently. The National Disaster Management Authority in the country proposes the development of Village Disaster Management Plans for each locality where frontline health workers like ASHAs and ANMs play a major role of stakeholders.⁴ However, most of the Accredited Social Health Activists in the state have not received any formal training to manage disasters. In the background of the devastating floods and landslides occurred in the neighbouring districts in 2018, a training program was arranged for 40 ASHAs in the field practice areas of a medical college in Mysuru in July 2019 to improve the preparedness and raise the awareness about disaster management. The district was affected by an unexpected event of floods almost one month after the training programme and 7 of the ASHAs trained were actively involved in various flood relief activities. We are attempting to narrate the benefits they could achieve by getting training in disaster management before the event.

Workshop and Mock Drill on Disaster Management for ASHAs

Workshops and training on disaster preparedness and management were conducted in July 2019 for 40 ASHAs belonging to 3 different Primary Health Centers in Mysuru district. Hands-on training with the help of adequate audio-visual aids was given on various pre-disaster preparations like situational analysis, hazard analysis, vulnerability analysis, capacity analysis and risk analysis. The health workers were trained adequately in warning, evacuation and rescue, first aid, sanitation, shelter management, relief management, carcass disposal, post-disaster counseling, damage assessment, and reconstruction and rehabilitation with special attention in health-related topics up to the expectations of National Disaster Management Authority according to the Village Disaster Management Plan.⁴ Basic life support measures and simple emergency medical procedures like wound care, fracture immobilization and triage were demonstrated to the participants by the resource persons. A mock drill was arranged as part of the programme to elaborate on the preparations and actions required during the occurrence of disasters in the village. The training was concluded with positive feedback from the participants and ASHA workers gained knowledge and a better understanding of various responsibilities and actions required during disasters.

Translating Knowledge into Action: Involvement of Trained ASHAs in Disaster Management.

A total of 15 trained ASHAs belonging to 4 sub-centres of two

different Primary Health Centres were involved in relief activities after a severe flood due to the opening of dams in Kabani River in the locality, one month after the workshop. The health workers gave feedback to the authors that the relief activities were, much faster and effective since they had already attended mock drill and had first hand knowledge on disaster management. The ASHAs were able to give timely warning to the residents of the villages in the risky areas by doing house to house visit. The health workers successfully shifted all the residents to safer places before the floods and prevented casualties and loss of valuable documents by timely action. The trained workers reported that they were able to coordinate the actions of local public health facility by ensuring the involvement of the Medical Officer and nursing staff. All the residents were constantly visited by the ASHAs and periodic health checkups were done and minor ailments were treated and references were given where necessary. The Accredited social health Activists educated the flood-affected people regarding the importance of personal hygiene and sanitation measures to be taken during and after the flood by doing house to house visits. Appropriate measures were taken by the ASHAs to ensure the better health and sanitation of the residents. One of the ASHAs gave feedback to the authors that "90% of the information we had regarding flood relief was from attending the workshop and mock drill."

From this, we observe that training frontline health workers like ASHAs and ANMs can bring revolutionary changes in the village level disaster management in the country. The ASHAs who are residents of the communities can execute more effective actions during disasters especially in components like health and sanitation. Training and workshops should be made available for all the frontline health workers in the country for better outcomes in disaster management.

Thank you.

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