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FUTURE OF NEUROLOGY IN PAKISTAN

The burden of neurological diseases in Pakistan is not known. According to WHO reports, burden of neurological diseases in developing countries range from 4-7% as compared to 7-11% in developed countries. An estimated burden of 5% translates into staggering 8 million people suffering from neurological diseases in Pakistan. Among these include stroke, epilepsy, headaches, dementias, neurological trauma, Parkinson's diseases, multiple sclerosis, nerve and muscle diseases and genetic disorders. These neurological diseases are major cause of disability around the globe including Pakistan.

There are about 160 trained neurologists in country for a population of 160 million (one per million). Only 15 medical colleges (out of 72) have a neurology department or neurology faculty. Most of the medical students coming out of these medical colleges do not go through structured neurology teaching by a neurologist. Same is true for post graduate medical training. These numbers are worrisome and are representative of a health policy with very little focus on neurology.

The role of neurology professional societies is commendable. Pakistan Society of Neurology (PSN) is the representative organization of all neurologists in Pakistan. For the last ten years society is organizing two national neurology conferences every year. Official journal of society (Pakistan Journal of Neurological sciences) is indexed with PMDC. The society is publishing official guidelines for various neurological diseases in Pakistan. PSN is currently presided by Prof Shaukat Ali (Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Center). The society has played strong advocacy role in growth of neurology in Pakistan. Pakistan stroke society was recently established and is affiliated with World Stroke Organization. This society organizes seminars, workshops, public awareness sessions and a biennial conference. Stroke society is currently headed by Dr. Nadir Zafar Khan (Sheikh Zayed hospital, Lahore). Pakistan Headache Society (PHS) is fairly new and affiliated with International Headache Society. It is active in organizing CME seminars, public awareness sessions and free medical camps for headache patients. Current president of PHS is Dr. Aziz Sonawalla (Aga Khan University). Multiple Sclerosis (MS) research and welfare trust was started few years ago to promote awareness and research related to MS in Pakistan. This trust also provides financial and social support to MS patients. Epilepsy association of Pakistan is working for more than a decade under leadership of Dr. Hasan Aziz (Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Center). This organization has organized many epilepsy awareness and treatment camps across the country. These societies had played pivotal role in take off of neurology as an independent specialty in Pakistan.

The number of neurology training programs is growing. There are currently 14 CPSP approved programs in the country. These programs will likely to grow in coming years due to a very supportive role of CPSP. Neurology community should commit to a target of producing 40-50 neurologists per year for next 10 years to meet current national need of neurological care by trained neurologists.

A national health survey for neurological diseases is a must to identify point prevalence of neurological diseases in Pakistan. We believe that findings of national health survey will have a huge impact on our national health policy. Retaining neurologists in Pakistan is the second most important issue. Large number of neurologists are moving to Middle East after completion of training due to lack of jobs and positions in Pakistan. Neurology departments should be established at all medical colleges in Pakistan to promote neurologic teaching and education for medical students and postgraduate trainees. Our national health policy should focus on availability of neurological care at all district hospitals in Pakistan. Strong advocacy efforts are needed at professional and public levels to promote neurological care of Pakistani people. Neurology community in Pakistan has achieved a lot in last five years but lot more still has to be done.

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