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Adeel Ahmed Khan
Aga Khan University

Zeeshan Ahmed

Muhammad Asadullah Siddiqui

Neelofer Sami

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Devolution of Health Sector in Pakistan After 18th Constitutional Amendment: Issues and Possible Solutions

Sir,

The 18th constitutional amendment has been considered a milestone in the history of Pakistan as it has devolved major legislative and executive authorities alongside departments from federal to provincial level that includes health as well.¹ However, in the process of devolution, there are certain issues that have arisen. Issues arose after devolution included absence of federal structure of health for overseeing federal responsibilities, lack of funds for proper functioning of programmes at the provincial level, health regulation specifically in case of drug regulation, lack of robust mechanism for transfer of power to provinces, lack of mechanism of community involvement in decision-making, misuse of funds due to lack of capacity at the provincial level etc.

During the interim government period last year, a new division has been formed to look after health issues at the federal level after 2 years of disarray in health sector post-devolution phase.² During these 2 years, various federal health responsibilities were kept under seven different divisions and ministries of health. Some vertical programmes that included National Programme on Malaria, Tuberculosis (TB), Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Extended Programme of Immunization (EPI) were re-launched at the national level. It was due to donors' dissatisfaction on the performance of these programs and as Pakistan being one of the three countries in the world jeopardizing international efforts to eradicate polio virus, were some reasons for this policy move.³ However, there was resistance from the parliamentarians regarding this move, as they see this step against the spirit of devolution; constitutionally when this type of lacunae arises, should be discussed in council of common interest (CCI), which was not done in this case.⁴ Also last year, the debacle of poor quality drugs in Punjab province also paved the way for the

restoration of federal regulatory authority for drugs and medicines.

Devolution is a complex phenomenon and there are various factors that influence the success or failure of decentralization. These factors include lack of strategy for implementation, lack of adequate preparation, the mind-set of federal bureaucracy, inadequate financing and weak capacity at all levels. In the context of Pakistan, the process of devolution has many issues to be addressed. That includes the smooth transition of responsibilities from federal to provincial level under the umbrella of some federal body that should oversee the smooth transition. Capacity building of the provinces regarding the implementation of various health programs should also be monitored.

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Adeel Ahmed Khan¹, Zeeshan Ahmed², Muhammad Asadullah Siddiqui³ and Neelofer Sami⁴

¹ *Department of Community Health Sciences, The Aga Khan University, Karachi.*

² *Department of Community Medicine, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi.*

³ *School of Health Sciences, Queen Margret University, UK*

⁴ *Willows Foundation, Pakistan.*

Correspondence: Dr. Adeel Ahmed Khan, House No. A-647, Sector II-A, North Karachi, Karachi.

E-mail: adeel.khan@aku.edu

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