

THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN AYURVEDA

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda is believed to be the oldest medical science of the human civilization. It is more clearly the science of life as it transcends the mere treatment of disease and embraces a wide array of principles and practices which deals with each individual in entirety. Postulations proposed by *Ayurveda* elites are of perennial relevance and many of those hold good value even today. Some of the contemporary concepts of today can be understood by the same age old principles and practices of *Ayurveda*. The present document tries to analyze the concept of public health and health in terms of *Ayurveda*. Public health as a discipline is mainly seen as a part of or a similar stream to community medicine. But the classical texts of *Ayurveda* also describe certain principles of public health in its own parlances. Though the classical texts of *Ayurveda* describes many principles such as infectious disease, immunity, nutrition etc. but the present document will focus on the concept of public health and health in brief.

Keywords: *Ayurveda*, Public Health.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is an ancient Indian system of medicine, which stresses principally on prevention of body ailments rather than simply relieving pathological problems or symptoms. *Ayurveda* believes in the treatment of an individual as a whole. The real value of *Ayurveda* lies in its basic principles, including its unique concepts of *Panchamahabhuta* (Five elements), *Prakriti* (Constitution), *Guna* (Quality), *Rasa* (Taste), *Agni* (Gastric fire), *Dosha* (Humour), *Dhatu* (Tissues), *Mala* (Faeces), *Srotas* (Channels), and its personalized approach to *Nidan* (Etiology), *Cikitsa* (Treatment) and *Rasayana* (Macrobiotics/Life lengthening drugs).¹ Various principles described in the classical texts of *Ayurveda*

hold good value even today. The present day *Ayurveda* have undergone many changes as per the need of the day, but, important principles have remained unchanged. Public health as a discipline is mainly seen as a part of or a similar stream to community medicine. But the classical text of *Ayurveda* also describes certain principles of public health in its own parlances. The classical texts of *Ayurveda* describe many principles relevant to public health such as infectious disease, immunity, nutrition etc. But this present document is limited to the concept of public health and health in brief.

DISCUSSION

The present document is confined to two important concepts; the concept of public health and thereby deriving the related

concept of health. This is so because when we try to understand the concept of public health in *Ayurveda* we also should understand that of the health. This document does not go in detail to what all principles have been described under the big umbrella of public health in *Ayurveda*. The specific concepts and principles require deeper study for detailed insight about each one of them. This study deliberately limits its scope to the brief concept of public health and health. On the other hand it attempts to garner as much information as needed to understand these two concepts. Let us go one by one as per the following few lines:

Concept of Public Health in Ayurveda

CEA Winslow in 1920 defined Public Health as, “the science and art of preventing diseases, prolonging life, and promoting health and efficiency through organized community efforts...”² The definition emphasizes on three important features, those are, prevention of disease, prolongation of life and promotion of health. These three important features have also been emphasized by proponents of *Ayurveda* like great saint Charak and others. He mentions about the objectives of *Ayurveda* which indirectly defines public health and its objective.³

The hymn delineates two things; one is the protection of health of a healthy individual and second is the alleviation of disease of a patient. Here “*Susthasya*” means of a healthy individual, “*swasthya*” means health, “*rakshanam*” means protection; “*aturashya*” means of the patient, “*vikara*” means disease, “*prasamanam*” means alleviation. So the hymn emphasizes on the

protection of the health of a healthy individual, means, if a person is healthy his/her health is ensured. For this purpose Ayurvedic proponents advocates various life style administrations which are described in Ayurvedic classical texts. Some of these modalities are the concept of *Dinacharya* (Daily health promotional activities) and *Ritucharya* (Health promotional activities during specific season), *Aahara* (Specific dietary regimen), *Pathya* (Complementary to medications), *Apathya* (Contradictory to medications) etc. Many of these modalities mentioned above are basically the health promotion strategies of present day. The second part of the hymn describes about curative and preventive health, means alleviation of disease. But if we look at various therapeutic regimens described in the classical texts of *Ayurveda*, all of those justify three levels of prevention such as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Let us understand this very well; primary prevention emphasizes on health promotion and specific protection which can be achieved by above said modalities; secondary prevention emphasizes on early diagnosis and treatment which can be achieved by various modalities of diagnosis such *nadi pariksha* (examination of pulse), *darshana* (inspection), *sparshana* (palpation), and *prashna* (interrogation) etc. and treatment modalities such shaman (alleviation) & sodhana (purification); tertiary prevention emphasizes on disease modification and disability limitation which can also be achieved by the help of various treatment modalities such as *Pancakarma cikitsa* etc. Briefly the principles and practices of *Ayurveda* justify the

principles and practice of public health in its own way.

Concept of Health in Ayurveda

Again the definition of health proposed by WHO can also be understood in the light of *Ayurveda*. The widely accepted definition of health is that given by the World Health Organization (1948) in the preamble to its constitution, which is as follows:

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity.”

This definition has three dimensions of health, physical, mental and social. It rules out the mere absence of disease and stands with a broad definition of health encompassing all three dimensions of health. Similarly Sushruta, one of the great proponents of *Ayurveda* defined health in his classical treatise called Sushrut Samhita.⁴

The hymn can be understood as per the following description; “*sama dosha*”(balanced humour), “*samagnischa*”(balanced enzymes and metabolites), “*sama dhatu*”(balanced tissue system), “*malakriya*”(state of excretory functions), “*prasanna*”(ecstasy), “*atmendriya manah*”(soul, sense organs and mind), “*swasthya iti abhidhiyate*”(called as healthy state). Before comparing this definition with that of the WHO’s one, let us understand these concepts very well which will indirectly help us to compare it better. *Ayurveda* is based on the principle of Dosh, Dhatu, Mala, and Agni. Health is the outcome of the harmonized state of these factors whereas the opposite leads to ill health. Dosh is understood by humour as its modern parlance and

Ayurveda describes about three different types of such Doshas named *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* and each of these Doshas are again classified in to five different types. Some people compare *Vata* with nervous system owing to some of its characteristics, *Pitta* with GI system and especially with gastric enzymes and the metabolites and *Kapha* with some of the fluids of our body such phlegm and synovial fluid. *Ayurveda* describes seven different types of Dhatu, these are *rasa*, *rakta*, *mamsa*, *meda*, *asthi*, *majja* and *shukra*. So from *rasa* (life sap) the body develops *rakta* (blood), from *rakta* it develops *mamsa* (muscles), from *mamsa* is developed *meda* (fat), from *med* is developed *asthi* (bones), from *asthi* the body develops *majja* (nervous system) and from *majja* is generated *sukra*. Thus, *vaat*, *Pitta* and *kapha* rule the body kingdom, i.e. the kingdom of *rasa*, *rakta*, *mamsa*, *med*, *asthi*, *majja* and *shukra* and hence the body continues to function. Our daily life activities are a result of this functioning. Waste products, which are byproducts of our daily activities, are called *malas*. *Mala* (faeces), *akshimala* (dirt coming from the eyes), *mutra* (urine) and *sweda* (sweat) are the *malas* mentioned by *Ayurveda*. To summarize, *Ayurveda* explains the body functions using the *Dosh-Dhatu-Mala* concept. *Doshas* are body constituents which are responsible for the way the body functions. This body is made up of seven *dhatu*s. *Malas* are waste products of the body. If this chain works well, we can maintain good health. If anything goes wrong in this chain of activity then we are affected by disease.

Let us understand the WHO definition of health as per the concepts of “*swasthya*”. The definition proposed by Sushrut also says about physical, mental and social health; the physical health is related to *Dosha, Dhātu, Mala* and *Agni*, means, their harmonized presence will lead to healthy state and the opposite will lead to unhealthy state or diseased state; the social and mental dimensions of health is related with the stage of ecstasy of soul, sense organs (*Indriya*) and the mind. Here the sense organs give a social relevance; means, these sense organs always get access to social issues and happenings bringing social dimension in to health.

CONCLUSION

Ayurveda concerns mostly with longevity, whose notion is not only limited merely to long-lasting life, but it encompasses all the conditions to live in health and vitality in order to achieve a healthy death, meaning the natural final experience of the cycle of life. Thus, in *Ayurveda* the concept of public health, even encompassing all ages, focuses primarily on the individual capability of healthy aging intended as complete fulfilling one’s life.^{7,8} Finally *Ayurveda* is based on universal principles - not limited to a particular ethnic group or culture- being both person-centered and intercultural and it can be used as an integration of the existent healthcare systems as well as a template to rescue local traditional values in order to meet the needs of different populations.⁹ The present document is a theoretical approach to the concept of health and public health which does not obviously gain access in to the details of the principles and

practices of public health. The classical texts of *Ayurveda* delineate various principles relevant to the present day public health practice. *Ayurveda* is widely used in India as a system of primary health care, and interest in it is growing worldwide as well.¹⁰ The global trend of public health problems has got a paradigm shift to the chronic life style disorders from its previous focus on infectious diseases and *Ayurveda* is undoubtedly a boon to redress these problems with its age old principles. With the recent development of the National Rural Health Mission some of the principles and remedies are being used very effectively to redress the public health problems. The best example is the use of “*Punarnavadi Mandura*” for the treatment of anemia at a large scale in the community.¹¹ Modern medicine has been extraordinarily developed with the amalgamation of technology in the field of diagnostic, prognostic, and curative procedures.¹² But the simple regimens described in ancient classical texts are of immense use in handling public health problems faced by the present world today. The study is a review on the concept of public health and health in *Ayurveda* in brief but the above said narrations can also be studied in piecemeal to find out the relevance and suitability of using *Ayurveda* as a way to redress emerging and reemerging public health problems of the present day.

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