

## Editorial

# Voluntarism: A Way Forward for Health Care Delivery in Developing World

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Volunteer is a term which refers to the provision of services by choice or free will of a person, organization or group of individuals with no financial gain in full awareness and appreciation <sup>(1)</sup>. It is an international phenomenon in which the individuals provide their time and services free of cost to an organization for the benefit of others <sup>(2)</sup>. It is vital for the sustainability and smooth functioning of the nonprofit and community organizations that the participation on volunteer basis should be regular and ongoing <sup>(3)</sup>. This is worth mentioning that in United States during the year of 2000, 15.5 billion hours were contributed by 83.9 million volunteers which is equal to an amount of USD 39.2 billion wages for the employees <sup>(4)</sup>. During the year of 2006, there were 5.2 million volunteers in Australia contributing around 623 million hours to the non-profit segment. This contribution value is equal to a wage of 15 billion AUD\$ <sup>(5)</sup>.

Volunteer organizations are key players in the economy of any country as employers and service providers. These organizations add value to the overall financial productivity and shrink the burden on government expenditure. The growth of economy is also linked with this sector by the establishment of favorable environment. It has been concluded in the studies by Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society that during a year, around 140 million people of 37 countries involve in unpaid work. This huge number may consti-

tute the 9<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. The worth of contribution by volunteers to global economy is approximately \$400 billion.

Recently, there is an increasing trend of research regarding potential benefits of volunteer services. It has been concluded in different studies that self esteem, life quality improvement, social support and adoption of healthy life styles were associated with volunteering<sup>(6)</sup>. Research based evidence correspond to the fact that societies have been deeply and diversely affected with the phenomenon of volunteerism. This experience has also been considered as a form of social capital to assist marginalized communities, encourage social involvement and participation of the public. This voluntary work leads to the formation of civil society and renewal of the community. The voluntary sector gained its strength by developing strong cooperation and coordination among key stakeholders including individuals, communities, business and governments.

Although this is an excellent phenomenon, however, the constraints of time regarding the limit of participation by the volunteers is an increasing issue <sup>(7) (8)</sup>. This is evident by the decline in average number of hours contributed by the volunteers <sup>(9) (6)</sup>. The nature of volunteering is changing day by day. Preference is shifting for short-term, flexible and episodic opportunities for volunteering<sup>(10)</sup>. However, capacity build-

ing programs to sustain episodic volunteers have not been established by many organizations<sup>(5)</sup>. Volunteerism in the form of a short-term international work is often criticized for different reasons including a uni-directional flow of volunteers and material provisions. But the impact of the volunteer services in the public health initiatives is not negligible within the boundaries of a country or on global level.

Volunteer services have played a vital role for rescue, relief and rehabilitation during the natural calamities, manmade disasters or any other human crisis especially in the developing and low-income countries like Pakistan. The earthquake of 2008 in Pakistan witnessed a massive mobilization of the volunteers to the affected areas and wide range of services were provided during and after this disaster. These services are not limited to the emergency situations only but the volunteers are available for short duration on regular basis as well. These volunteers are internally motivated, committed and dedicated having roots in the local community. Importantly well-qualified and highly skilled human resource is also available as volunteers.

Voluntarism can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the health care delivery especially in the developing world. The global cost of economy oriented medical care is a major concern for the policy makers. The spending on the health workforce is a major portion of the total health care cost. Developing a model for the volunteer health workforce as a Public Health intervention <sup>(11)</sup> is an important area of research. Apparently in the existing global scenario of economic concerns, it is quite astonishing that the very busy clinicians are going to hard areas for the Public Health initiatives. Apart from the volunteer services, this human resource also face many issues related with infrastructure and logistics. There must be some very important motivating and satisfying factors leading to this voluntarism. It is recommended that all the stakeholders including governments, public, private sectors and policy makers should consider volunteerism as an intervention for the improvement in health care delivery and utilize this phenomenon for the

health of communities in developing countries.

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