Family Physician Program in Iran: Considerations for Adapting the Policy in Urban Settings

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Abstract
Nationwide implementation of Family Physician (FP) program started in 2005 and targeted almost 25,000,000 citizens residing in rural areas and cities with less than 20,000 populations in Iran. Despite its blantant initiation that resulted in some modest achievements,¹,² the future of FP looks unclear in Iran. Thus far, no longitudinal evaluation of the implementation and impact of FP program has been conducted. However, meager evidence highlights the facilitating role of an existing and strong Primary Health Care (PHC) network in the implementation of FP in rural areas in Iran.² A longstanding challenge, however, as emphasized by most stakeholders, remains to be the expansion of FP program into urban settings,³ where the PHC is undeveloped and fragile as well as the powerful private sector is resistant. Using an adapted conceptual framework of institutions, ideas, and interests,⁴ this policy perspective aims to shed light on main difficulties of FP implementation in urban areas of Iran. We analyze FP policy in the context of ongoing interactions and conflicts among institutions (the structures and rules that shape policies), interests (the groups and individuals influencing policy), and ideas (discourses around policies).⁵ Our argument will, we envisage, help plan for more appropriate implementation of FP in cities in Iran, and hopefully beyond.

Keywords: Family physician program, ideas, institutions, interests, Iranian health system, primary health care (PHC)

Institutions involved in FP program

The organization of health system depends on the institutional context, which influences the policy environment and its outcomes. The institutional context of rural areas in Iran is different from that of urban areas. This necessitates contextualization of FP policy, when planning its expansion into urban settings.⁶ A core institutional context, namely an active PHC network facilitated the implementation of FP program in rural settings. Meanwhile, the PHC, alongside other institutional factors may hinder the implementation of FP in urban settings.

Before the Islamic revolution in 1979, the rural parts of Iran, accommodating 65% of the population (about 35,000,000 in 1979), were generally underdeveloped and had poor public health indices. The declaration of Alma Ata (1978), issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), highlighted the fundamental role of PHC in strengthening health systems. Values and goals of PHC strongly matched with the underlying ideology of the Islamic revolution, i.e. social justice, equity, human rights, universal access to health services, prioritization of the most vulnerable, and community involvement.⁷ The Parliament (Majlis) and the government endorsed the Alma Ata declaration in 1984,⁸ as a result of which, the Ministry of Health (MoH) at the time (now the Ministry of Health and Medical Education: MoHME) adopted the PHC approach as the core to redesign the delivery of health services in Iran. National, comprehensive and inexpensive implementation of community-based PHC network began in the early 1980s in Iran. Widely expanded during the 1990s, the PHC aimed to deliver basic health services (i.e. child immunization, oral rehydration, family planning, prenatal care, respiratory infection management and environmental health) through indigenous community health care providers, called Behvarzes. The PHC remained comprehensive in rural areas, where Behvarzes provided proactive health services and played gate-keeping role. While it was fragile in urban setting, the PHC was a key to major improvements in several health indices in Iran (Table 1).¹⁰

Notwithstanding exemplary achievements, the PHC network became gradually weak to respond to the emerging needs of population (e.g. high burden of non-communicable diseases, increasing public expectation to access qualified physicians, as well as fast growing and expensive medical technologies). Hence, reforming the Iranian health system through two parallel policies: FP (to re-engineering service delivery) and universal health insurance (to enhance affordability) started.¹¹ FP endorsed the principles of an effective PHC; i.e. accessibility; continuity; team-based and community-oriented; coordination; preventive focus; and evidence-based care.¹² Given these considerations, the pre-existing, trustworthy, and reputable PHC network was a core institutional facilitator of the implementation of FP program in rural settings in Iran.

Contrary to rural areas, the institutional characteristics of urban settings in Iran may hinder the implementation of FP policy. These include: the passive and fragile PHC network, strong private sector with massive conflict of interest with FP, public’s high confidence in private care, increasing health indices in Iran (Table 1).¹⁰
freedom of choice to use health services, and multi-dimensional and more diverse cultural norms than rural areas, among others.

The role of ideas

Ideas and the way that they were shaped, influenced the implementation of FP policy significantly. Lack of a macro philosophy for the entire Iranian health system led to contradictory interpretations of FP goals and hampered its implementation in almost all cities. There exists, also, a gap between the rural PHC equity-focused system and the urban curative model, where the evidence suggests the dominance of the latter. In line with principles of the Islamic revolution, while equity and outreaching the poor (i.e. the egalitarian philosophy) facilitated the approval of FP program and its bumpy implementation in rural Iran; the libertarian philosophy (i.e. the pro-market ideology) and strong unregulated private sector in urban areas hindered the expansion of FP program into cities. Prior to health transformation plan currently being implemented in Iran, pro-market perspectives, driven by individual choice and influenced by powerful medical professional lobbies, with a strong bias towards curative medicine and expensive diagnostics, have been dominant face of health system in Iran. This contradicts, very clearly, the egalitarian intentions proclaimed in the Iranian constitution and many national laws (e.g. Iranian Constitution, the 5-Year Development Plans, mega policies for health recently announced by supreme leader, and National Health Insurance Act).

An interesting point to consider is the advocacy and support for FP policy by politicians, policy makers and other stakeholders from across political views (i.e. reformists versus conservatives). However, despite these congruent ideas, the national implementation of FP and its expansion into urban areas has remained rhetoric. This could be partly due to the strong tendency among Iranian urban residents towards specialized and curative care, which is mostly provided by specialist doctors, mainly specialists in the private sector, who may possess the biggest proportion of various investments in healthcare system. Let alone the possibility of making public policies by some stakeholders with meaningful interests in the private sector. Moreover, the nature of services, provided through FP gives the fore for rent-seeking in that resources meant for FP services are much easier to transfer compared to curative and diagnostic services, which require high medical technologies.

We used the conceptual framework of institutions, ideas, and interests as well as the complex interaction among them, to portray the challenges of expanding the implementation of FP policy into urban areas in Iran. Specialist doctors in the private sector are the most powerful stakeholders in healthcare provision in cities in Iran. Unless a winner-winner situation for the private sector is created to exploit their capacities, FP program will achieve no or little success in the cities. Smooth and meaningful implementation of FP in Iran can be achieved through fundamental changes in the governance and organization of health system towards greater decentralization; robust transparency, balanced distribution of power among various healthcare providers, adjusted tariff system for medical services, and most importantly educating people to seek their care through referral system.

The importance of interests

Stakeholders’ underlying interests, their political incentives, and actions to galvanize their interests, may play a fundamental role in policy implementation. Medical doctors possess three sources of power: resources, technical skills, and knowledge. As the most powerful players in the Iranian health system, many specialist doctors, the majority of them work in the private sector and are responsible for above 80% of outpatient care provision in cities, do not support preventive services provided through FP in Iran. This phenomenon can be explained by the rent-seeking model: a process by which the medical professionals compete to obtain the surpluses created by imperfectly competitive markets. The model illustrates stronger influence of medical doctors, particularly specialists, compared to non-physicians and general physicians in the Iranian health system. This is partly due to unequal distribution of political influence among healthcare providers in favor of physicians, mainly specialists in the private sector, who may possess the biggest proportion of various investments in healthcare system. Let alone the possibility of making public policies by some stakeholders with meaningful interests in the private sector.

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