



Towards A Culture Of Compassion: Integrating Palliative Care Into Higher Education Under New Education Policy

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Abstract: New Education Policy 2020 lays special emphasis on principles of compassion that emphasize social-emotional learning. There is a robust theoretical basis in a range of disciplines for rooting compassion into Higher Education curricula. Students should be trained in the practical value of alertness to the needs of the society. There is scope for its practical deliverance as social stewardship. UGC's 'Professor of Practice', can work in tandem with this to assist the higher education institutions in experiential learning, skilling, and extension activities. As per WHO statistics, only 14% receive palliative care and the need is expected to double by 2060. Palliative care in India is still at an early stage of development with an estimated less than 3% of cancer patients having access to the facility. High patient volume with limited access is the key reason why youngsters are needed in Indian palliative care.

Index Terms – Compassion, Higher Education, New Education Policy, Palliative Care, Professor of Practice, Social Stewardship

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF COMPASSION: INTEGRATING PALLIATIVE CARE INTO HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER NEW EDUCATION POLICY

Keeping with Mahatma Gandhi's concept that education should cater to a holistic development of the mind, body, and spirit and that its methods should be practical and hands-on and integrated with the student's environment, New Education Policy 2020 lays special emphasis on the development of each individual into good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience. The Policy is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities but also social, ethical, and emotional faculties and dispositions. Education must build character, enable learners to be ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring, while at the same time should be capable of preparing them for gainful, fulfilling employment. Principles of compassion that emphasize social-emotional learning and the importance of empathy, understanding, and kindness are woven into the texture of the Policy as it can help create inclusive and nurturing learning environments, and prepare students to be responsible and compassionate individuals.

Compassion is not merely the personal disposition of heightened sensitivity to suffering fellow-beings, nor is it a universally recognized personal quality among human service professionals alone. It rather is a moral disposition that contributes to the progress of the whole humanity. Recognizing the essential role that compassionate empathy plays in ethical deliberation and moral functioning, scholars from various corners of professional and practical ethics can be found urging educators to assign greater priority to compassion as an educative goal. Compassion is a multi-dimensional concept that weaves together emotional sensitivity, motivational strength, and practical wisdom. It requires pro-social motivation and behaviour to foster an environment where empathy, understanding, and positive action coalesce to transform the educational experience and to spur the comprehensive growth of students. Consequently it delivers a

dynamic and powerful force that drives positive change in them. Fostering compassion and kindred traits among students has long been considered an essential part of higher education.

There is a robust theoretical basis in a range of disciplines for rooting compassion into Higher Education curricula providing an essential dimension to the domain of the Higher Education to serve the public good. Nevertheless, most programs do not offer courses tailored to the practice area. Students should be trained in the practical value of alertness to the needs of the society. Central to this is to introduce a course that is credit bearing towards degrees. What is essential is the theoretical discussions, and scope for its practical deliverance as social stewardship. University Grants Commission's 'Professor of Practice', a new initiative to bring the professional expertise into the academic institutions through a new category of positions, will work in tandem with this to enable the higher education institutions to formally associate with persons of eminence and encourage them to participate in experiential learning, skilling, and extension activities. This will help to take real world practices and experiences into the class rooms and also augment the faculty resources in higher education institutions. In turn, society will benefit from trained graduates equipped with the relevant skills.

Needs Assessment, a systematic process that identifies and addresses the gap between current and desired conditions, is the first step to be undertaken before students at tertiary level education are embarked upon a social stewardship of any type. Social stewardship refers to a systematic process of gathering information to identify the social issues and gaps within a community that needs to be addressed through well-defined initiatives. The practice is to work towards collective goals to make the desirable impact on society and the environment. This should be designed to promote social responsibility and welfare, focusing on supporting communities, enhancing quality of life, and fostering sustainable practices that benefit society as a whole. These initiatives need to involve local government bodies and local people. It can be challenging for a Higher Education Institution to pinpoint exactly where in the society enhancements are needed. The surveys conducted by authorized institutions and agencies can be resorted to. The findings can be tested with diverse groups of target who might have varying perspectives on its efficacy.

The survey conducted by Medical Professionals and published in Indian Journal of Palliative Care is a case in point. It strongly recommends that courses on palliative care should be incorporated in undergraduate curriculum to sensitize the students from the beginning itself. Though the recommendations are aimed at medical students and residents, palliative care needs more than medical care and the service of the medical professionals. Medical discipline in India focuses on cure rather than compassionate care. There is a strong need of spreading palliative care awareness all over the country. Palliative care is concerned with improving quality of life and relieving sufferings in patients with advanced incurable terminal diseases. Palliative care in India is still in infancy stage due to lack of knowledge, attitude and skills among health care providers. It is here that intervention from the non-medical personnel becomes inevitable.

As per WHO statistics, out of the estimated 40 million needy patients, only 14% receive palliative care. By the year 2060, the need is expected to double, making the requirement for palliative care professionals and services a global public health concern. Civic engagement is considered as the only solution. "Social involvement in palliative care" is called for. This refers to the active participation of community members, social workers, and support networks in providing holistic care to individuals facing life-limiting illnesses, addressing not just their medical needs but also their social, emotional, and spiritual well-being through various support mechanisms like emotional counselling, accessing community resources, and facilitating family connections. Students can play a significant role here. Placing the vibrant youngsters at the centre of any development process can ensure inclusiveness and sustainable participation. Students can demonstrate active citizenship by being involved in palliative care in their community and contributing to its betterment. It caters to their personal growth by fostering empathy, responsibility, and a sense of social awareness. Its community impact is priceless: a tangible difference in the lives of people around them.

It is precisely with this conviction that extension of students of higher education into palliative care is sought. Students are to be given training to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively support patients facing life-limiting illnesses, focusing on managing symptoms, providing emotional support, and respecting patient autonomy. It covers physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of patients and their families. Students should work in unison with different healthcare professionals like doctors and nurses, social workers and family members to provide comprehensive care.

Engaging students in palliative care has a dual advantage. On the one hand their energy can be channelized and utilized for raising quality of life in the society, and on the other, students can enjoy a richness of experiences as they get to relate with more people. It will largely contribute to their outlook on life. All of these experiences will be quality building blocks that would make their personality. Palliative care needs more volunteers because they can provide crucial emotional and practical support to patients with serious

illnesses, which often exceeds the capacity of professional healthcare staff alone, allowing for a more personalized and holistic approach to care, especially in areas like companionship, errands, and emotional listening, while also alleviating some pressure on paid caregivers.

Palliative care in India is still at an early stage of development with an estimated less than 3% of cancer patients having access to adequate pain relief. Manpower is crucial in India's palliative care system due to the vast need for support that often exceeds available healthcare resources, allowing them to provide essential companionship, practical assistance, and emotional support to patients and their families, particularly in reaching those who might otherwise be missed by the healthcare system, thereby improving the quality of life for terminally ill individuals. A network of doctors, nurses, paramedics, other professionals, institutions, and organizations, including commercial establishments has to be established. Palliative care is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life-threatening illness.” Dignity-centred care is crucial for patients as dignity violations can harm their bodies, spirits, morality, and spirituality, exposing them to more stress and anguish. Palliative care, with its fundamental component of respect for dignity and human rights, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, colour, age, gender, disabilities, or socio-political circumstances is the elixir. It is a team-based, holistic approach that aims to address the multidimensional needs of patients and families: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. The basic medical care needs of patients are managed by the patient's usual care team (for example, primary care practitioner, specialist doctors, nurses), while more complex needs are managed by a team trained in compassionate care and understanding of suffering and death.

High patient volume with limited access is the key reason why youngsters are needed in Indian palliative care. A large number of people in India require palliative care, but the healthcare infrastructure is often unable to meet this demand, making volunteers vital in providing additional support. Students can actively reach out to communities to identify individuals who need palliative care, particularly in rural areas where awareness may be low. Many patients lack family support or are isolated, and volunteers can provide companionship, conversation, and emotional support to alleviate loneliness. They can be assisted with daily tasks and errands, which can significantly ease the burden on caregivers. They can educate communities about palliative care, dispel myths, and encourage open conversations about end-of-life issues.

Utilizing students of Higher Education allows palliative care organizations to extend their reach without significantly increasing financial burdens. They need to be adequately trained in aspects of palliative care, including communication skills, pain management, and psychosocial support. Understanding the cultural nuances of the communities they serve is essential to provide culturally appropriate care. Practicing techniques for difficult conversations with patients and families and addressing emotional needs improves the communication skills and confidence level of students. Working with professionals from different disciplines helps in building inter-personal collaboration. Integrating compassion and palliative care into higher education curriculum typically involves dedicated coursework within undergraduate programmes, focusing on developing the skills and understanding necessary to provide sensitive and supportive care, effective communication, and patient listening. It aligns higher education to what the University Grants Commission envisages in its document on Fostering Social Responsibility & Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions in India 2.0. The thrust of the perspective is on some of the dynamics that need urgent attention if higher education is to facilitate growth and enrich the human condition. A focus on academic content is simply not enough. Along with is needed attributes such as a strong social commitment, belief in teamwork, pluralism, ability to work with diverse people, and a positive outlook.

Higher education must concern itself with how students use information and grow from its application. The existing needs and problems of the society must be the guiding factor in the shaping of the curriculum. We need to attend to outcomes and how to achieve those outcomes. The endeavour must be to ensure linkages with local institutions for sustainable community engagement programmes with a conviction that community engagement is not a standalone activity. It should be integrated in the regular curriculum of higher education to ensure this and the development of the society around the university.

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