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An Overview and Changing Scenario of Post-graduate Medical Education in Nepal: What Is the Way Forward?

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Postgraduate (PG) Medical Education Program in any country is to produce high quality professionals with required clinical competency and capability in teaching, research, leadership, communication, collaboration and health advocacy in addition to sound knowledge of the given specialty. Countries like Nepal should adopt the contemporary global trends and implement innovative approaches in medical education utilizing skill labs, information technologies; computer assisted teaching learning, simulation-based learning if practicable and others. The MD/MS/ or National Board curriculum should reflect and be in line with the core principles advocated by the world leaders/institutes of medical education.¹ Additionally, an institution imparting postgraduate program should provide facilities consistent with the overall academic program including exposure in applied basic medical sciences and other related subjects/areas as prescribed by the regulatory bodies like Medical Education Council (MEC), Nepal Medical Council (NMC), academia and the line ministries; in addition to the required number of faculties of related specialties for facilitating teaching/learning as per the set guidelines along with facilities of ancillary departments related to the concerned subject as per the requirement of the curriculum as well.^{1,2}

Although regulatory authorities have laid down standards for postgraduate programs and entry/exit examinations conducted by various medical colleges and affiliated to concerned universities, health science academies and other non-university health institutions, yet the levels of standards of evaluation vary in these institutions and equivalence and uniformity have to be maintained. Special emphasis should be given to entry by merit based central entrance test, competency-based evaluation

system for standardized common exit exams, provision of adequate qualified fulltime faculty members and adequate physical infrastructure, academic, clinical, administrative and residential facilities in any PG programs to produce quality specialists.³

BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDICAL EDUCATION IN NEPAL

The history of medical education in Nepal is only four decades' old. It was started with graduate medical education (MBBS) in the institute of medicine (IOM) in 1978 and now there is already an established postgraduate and subspecialty education system in place. At the advent of the private medical college in the nineties, specifically after 1993, there has been a spurt in postgraduate education. However, it is changing over the years and is being upgraded and updated. The Institute of Medicine started its first postgraduate program in General Practice in 1982; and in other subjects thereafter. Today, there are DM/MCh and PhD in some subjects in Nepal.³

NEED FOR POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

Due to a large number of production of the undergraduates in Nepalese medical field, there is an ever-increasing need for post-graduates and subspecialists in the country. A number of factors have driven and resulted in the current trend of subspecialisation in medical sciences. The first and foremost among these was the needs of the market. However, the standard and the quality of the PG education has been a challenging issue. Up to merely few decades ago, Nepal was largely dependent upon other countries for postgraduate medical education. Medical graduates had to wait for long, as the opportunity for postgraduate study was scarce.⁴ Now the scenario has changed and the available postgraduate programs and

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seats have also grown in number and quality as well.

NATIONAL BOARD OF MEDICAL SPECIALTIES IN NEPAL

The postgraduate program in the country continues to grow with several academia and universities running diverse specialty and subspecialties. However, there is a “demand-supply mismatch” in Nepal, many post-graduation aspirants are being unable to get seats and placement. The ongoing demands for postgraduate education are not met by the current universities and academia alone in the country. It is not easy to do post-graduation outside the country either, due to various constraints. Here comes the role of National Board of Medical Specialties (NBMS) of MEC. To respond to this need of the hour, the Government of Nepal has recently established the Medical Education Commission⁵ - a regulatory body for medical education in Nepal in 2075 with the objective of improving the quality of the Medical Education in Nepal by establishing high and uniform standards of education in medicine on an all-Nepal basis and utilizing existing infrastructure for capacity building. The provision of National Board of Medical Specialties, specifically in the MEC act and regulation, provides a platform for PG education in clinical subjects.^{5,6} NBMS though free residential training can fulfil the gap in PG medical education simultaneously improving the quality of clinical service, research culture and academization in any institute/hospital that is catering service to a large population across the country, even in the provincial level.

With changing concepts and trends, there are some essential points such as free Residential Training in hospitals, whether public or private, with adequate payment for the residents’ service is important and the expansion of free Residential Training programs to other appropriate hospitals utilizing the available facilities cost effectively without keeping unnecessary requirements.⁷ In this context, the establishment of a National Board i.e. NBMS to run post-graduation programs is under process and about to kick off with lots of hope in the field of PG medical education in the country. NBMS is envisioned to conduct postgraduate and postdoctoral examinations in approved clinical specialties leading to the award of Specialty/Subspecialty degree of National Board of Nepal.⁶ National Board for PG education is an innovative and a new approach with the aim of academization and upgrading mainly the non-university health institutions and fulfil the gap in the aspirations of undergraduate health professionals to become specialist health care providers. Now the National Board can accredit health

institutes and hospitals for PG training in specialty and subspecialties. The board qualifications awarded by the NBMS as a member or fellow should be equated with the postgraduate and post-doctorate degrees awarded by other Nepali universities /academies for all purposes. However, regulatory bodies also need to develop common consensus to standardize entry and exit, sound academic programs with common core curriculum and uniform innovative evaluation tools to ensure quality postgraduate medical education in Nepal.³

WAY FORWARD

All system prevailing in the country should be complementary and supplementary to each other. However, strengthening the university/academy system of PG education by increasing the seats and capabilities is needed. Institutional collaboration and networking, sharing of experience and comparisons can be done with international PG education providers. Regulating authorities like MEC and Nepal Medical Council still need to update regulations for the basic PG programs and subspecialty programs already up-and-running in Nepalese universities and medical academia for further development.

Nepal is also working for PG medical degrees from Medical Education Commission of Nepal as there is already a separate directorate for NBMS - working hard to materialize the responsibility bestowed on it by the country through MEC act of Nepal. The provision of NBMS in the MEC act/regulation provides a real hope for the future and then National Board qualifications will be well recognized and accepted as high standard specialist qualifications. However, universities/academia/ accredited institutions along with Medical Education Commission and the Nepal Medical Council must work together to ensure that the minimum standards with uniform basic common core curriculum, common exams, similar faculty criteria, positions and quality of postgraduate medical education in Nepal.

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