

Health Screening as a tool to tackle the growing burden of Non-Communicable Diseases in Pakistan

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Madam, Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and osteoporosis are highly prevalent in Pakistan.¹ Jafar et al estimated in their study that from 2010 to 2025, 3.2 million Pakistanis would lose their lives due to NCDs, causing a \$296 million loss annually by 2025 from the previous amount of \$152 million in 2010.¹ This grim picture highlights the importance of carrying out effective health screening programme was throughout the country to detect diseases at an early stage, which would reduce the number of deaths and consequently, the burden on economy.

Post devolution, the health sector has increasingly become a provincial subject. Unfortunately, the provision of a proper budget under the province of Sindh has come up short. Of the Rs 96.38 billion, only Rs 3 billion have been invested in preventative schemes for the upcoming year.²

Health screening is gaining more and more importance worldwide. Singapore carries out general as well as specific screening programmes in both private and public sector hospitals.³ The general screening programmes include medical health assessments, physical examinations, blood glucose levels and cholesterol tests.³ All hospitals include a basic health screening package entailing these 4 components as well as additional services such as ECGs, complete blood counts and more.³ However, health screening is carried out at relatively low rates in Pakistan. A study regarding barriers to colorectal cancer screening in Pakistan showed that although 75.1% acknowledged the importance of screening; only 14.9% of the participants were motivated to undergo screening.⁴ This was because of the lack of knowledge regarding screening procedures, facilities and unaffordability.⁴

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In summary, it is imperative that the government of Pakistan takes up affordable, quality health screening initiatives across the country. A health screening committee similar to UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) be established, which makes and monitors health screening policy in all the provinces. Organized health screening programmes should be implemented in all districts by sending out invitations through population registers or electoral rolls as done in Sweden and Australia respectively.⁵ The United States has achieved high rates of screening due to laws which make it mandatory for some cancers to be screened for.⁵ Such laws must also be introduced in Pakistan which target prevalent diseases existing in the country. All these measures and more are the need of the hour to deal with an epidemic of NCDs that has hit Pakistan.

Disclaimer: The article is not published or in the process in any other journal

Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Disclosure: The author(s) have no support or funding to report.

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