

Health Education in Schools

Are young adults sufficiently aware of health issues affecting them? Children today, even before they reach school, are using adult sophisticated language, know all about dinosaurs, can build Lego planes and castles and play complicated games on smart phones. Yet when they pass out from school they have little knowledge about their bodies, how it functions and about some dangerous diseases that can be prevented by modifying lifestyle. They know all about sex but little about its penalties.

The education system has disappointingly failed public in preparing educated and informed adults. Apart from washing hands after a visit to a toilet and before eating a meal, little else is taught to children in schools about health. As a young doctor and interested in preventive medicine, I was conscious of this fact and organised a school health education programme for a number of schools where I was working. It was a lecture based programme for high school students, who showed remarkable improvements in their knowledge of health issues on completion of the programme. The surveys before and after the programme proved that the knowledge gained about their bodies and health had significantly improved ([reference](#)). We published it and were pleased with ourselves and patted our backs. In hindsight, I realise that lecture based education may have worked then but may not be the best way to address this problem, even though there is a potential for young minds to retain knowledge gained. I am sure some of them would have retained some of the information provided for the rest of their lives. However, I think there are better ways of doing it and in this interactive age, participatory approach of education may be more productive. The approaches suggested here, shift the responsibility from teachers to the students themselves.

Obesity and related diseases

Since body weight and height are a personal matter, a practical session where students measure each other, can be more entertaining and educational. Periodic sessions of this activity may teach a few things to students about their bodies. A free software (WHO Anthro Plus) is available which can be used to record personal or group data on computer/tablet, and the programme generates summary reports on the touch of a key. Apart from being an interesting exercise for assessment of their body mass index (BMI) and knowing if they are normal or abnormal weight, it links with other subjects – maths, computing, scientific measurements and survey methodology. Interpretation of data then can lead to nutrition and lifestyle through group discussions/debate on problem of obesity and its causes, effect of diet and lack of physical activity on obesity or other related problems. Students could also set up a collective target to reach over time to reduce obesity levels in the class. In one programme many aspects of health can be covered. Participation and practical education is more instructive than a conventional classroom lecture.

Nutrition and links to obesity and related disorders

Obesity and its association with a number of chronic diseases is a matter of great concern. Unhealthy food choices and fast food has become a normal way of life today. One in three school children in USA are obese. According to a study published in Paediatric Obesity, an international journal, India will have over 17 million obese children by 2025. Lack of physical activity and overweightness is a reoccurring theme in our schools. Difference in BMI of those who regularly participate in sports and those who do not, may be instructive.

Heart and related issues

Another exciting activity for students could be to measure each other's blood pressure, pulse rate (heart rate) and respiration and effect of exercise on these measurements; linking it to the usefulness of exercise and its effect on heart and other important organs in flushing and irrigation of these vital

organs. Finally, linking it to nutrition; excessive fats and sugars and their effect on body functions.

Sexual Health and Responsibility associated with it

The unpleasant result of sexual experimentation among teenagers, in particular pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, are worrisome. Better ways have to be found to address these problems. Parents and teachers, equally find it difficult to tackle it effectively. Teenagers already know what teachers and parents are trying to tell them about sex. The best way to deal with this is to turn over the responsibility to the students themselves. Class teacher remains merely a source of information and a facilitator. Students can search internet to get information. A group discussion and finally presenting the findings of each group in a joint session can be enlightening. Having better understanding of the subject will also be effective in overcoming difficult situations and helping friends. Teen pregnancy, STIs and HIV/AIDS, selling/buying sex for favour or money, psychological impacts of sexual actions and outcomes are some of the areas which should form subjects for discussion and debate.

Reproduction as a result of sexual activity

As would be parents sooner or later, young school leavers need to understand the miracle of pregnancy, culminating into the birth of a new being. Importance of care during pregnancy, child birth and care after, need to be recognised. Vulnerability during infancy and childcare during first five years and how preventive measures can help improve the child survival. This calls for timely interventions of immunisations, nutritional needs, growth monitoring and development of a baby into a toddler and into a preschool child. Basic knowledge of these issues are critical for future parenthood.

Drugs, Smoking and Alcohol

Similar approaches of debate and discussion are the best ways to address the problems of drugs, smoking and alcohol abuse.

Whilst innovation is the key to the success of these programmes, some level of discipline is also required. Why is it that we do not have an examinable subject say “human body and health” in school education system. Is maths, history, geography or foreign languages more important than health knowledge of children completing school education? It is time to add this subject in school curriculum with full importance of examination and grades. Good grades in this subject will better equip those venturing further education in medicine and related subjects.

Teachers need to be equally interested in bringing about change. The first step is to increase their own knowledge of the subject. Some novel approaches have to be tried, where the likelihood of failure is not a possibility. Perhaps a special teacher, linked to biology department, has to be employed who could be accountable like all other teachers in delivering the results. Specialised teachers as health educators for schools may be required. It will necessitate additional funding. Perhaps a portion of health budget need to be shifted to education budget, which will be much more cost effective and efficient, and is very likely to be neutralised by reduction in chronic disease treatment and care in the long run. Marginal reduction in diabetes, heart disease and teen pregnancy, for example, could produce significant savings resulting in improvements in quality of life, morbidity and mortality.

Again, a huge subject and this article is only to draw attention to it. This urgent subject requires our consideration.