Sanitation in Developing Countries

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Sanitation in Developing Countries

Proceedings of a workshop on training held in Lobatse, Botswana, 14–20 August 1980

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Training of Health Assistants in Malawi

G.P. Malikebu

The training of health assistants in Malawi dates back to the 1930s. During the 1930s these health personnel were known as sanitary inspectors. It seems that the sanitary inspector used to enforce sanitary regulations within the villages, particularly the digging of latrines. It is often alleged that these inspectors used to dip sticks into the latrines to determine whether or not they were being used. The owners of those found not in use were brought to court and fined. There is no mention of any form of participation by the community/villagers in the entire exercise, except their being told to dig latrines and use them. Obviously, these sanitary inspectors became very unpopular within the villages and during the struggle for independence, attacks on the methods employed by inspectors in implementing hygiene were among the grievances voiced at rallies.

The present duties of health assistants include: inspection of domestic houses, factories, government buildings, public buildings, and housing estates; inspection of meat and other foods at markets (local villages), shops, and canteens; ensuring that immunization of children under 5 years of age and international travellers is carried out, as well as overseeing immunization campaigns and programs; maintaining control of communicable diseases; providing health education in schools/training centres, to hospital outpatients and in-patients, and to villages (health committees); and protection of drinking water supplies. The training of health assistants has been geared not only to conform with these duties but also to prepare the students for any other public health activity which may crop up in the future, either in the form of campaigns, projects, or programs.

Syllabus

Topics covered in the training of health assistants include: prevention of disease; water supplies; sanitation; refuse storage, collection, and disposal; vector control; malaria control; disinfection; health education; statistics; offensive trades; anatomy and physiology; nutrition; food hygiene; food and meat inspection; lighting; air and ventilation; village housing and planning; inspections and reports; building construction; and office organization.

Candidates

Candidates suitable for training as health assistants are required to be male persons not more than 25 years of age and have a Malawi Junior Certificate (or 2 years of secondary school education) or its equivalent, with passes in English, mathematics, and general science or physics with chemistry and biology (in addition, any person with relevant experience in public health work is also considered).
Training

Training takes place at the School of Hygiene in Zomba. The duration of the training is 2 years. There is also a period of 6 weeks for practical fieldwork, during which students are assigned to work with experienced health assistants who are under the supervision of a health inspector. During this period, the trainees gain some insights for their future careers. Activities during fieldwork cover such jobs as water protection, building construction, immunization, disinfestation, health education, meat inspection, premises and village inspections, and routine office work.

Evaluation

At the end of their course, the students take their final examination. The examination board is set up/chaired by the chief health inspector, with representatives from the University Polytechnic, local government (council), and the Ministry of Health. The principal acts as the secretary. This board sets the examination and invigilators are appointed to supervise the examination. The successful candidates are awarded the Ministry of Health, Health Assistant Certificate.

Future Prospects

Health assistants have only two ranks, that of technical assistant and senior technical assistant, but any health assistant who studies privately and succeeds in obtaining relevant subjects at the ordinary level gets selected for a 2 year upgrading course which is offered by the University Polytechnic and qualifies one for promotion to the T/O level. From there they could become a health inspector.

Tutors

Some subjects are covered by experts in those fields but the basic public health subjects are taught by experienced health inspectors who have had many years of experience in the field.