The Right Diagnosis: Pathology is Essential

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WHY PATHOLOGY (and what do Pathologists do?)

- Rapid diagnosis increases probability patients initiate CORRECT treatment, this means effective care with better outcomes
- Accurate diagnosis is the basis for clinical care, scientific research and health surveillance
- A study of U.S. and German cardiologists and oncologists found 66% of clinical decisions were guided by pathology tests

ISSUES AROUND PATHOLOGY

Lack of human resources

Out-of-pocket payment and presumptive diagnosis
In low income countries much of health care is paid out-of-pocket. Individuals may not appreciate the value of good diagnosis and use scarce funds for treatment. Incorrect treatment exacerbates anti-microbial resistance, worsens health and – in the extreme – leads to premature death.

Quality issues – the need for accreditation
In low and lower middle-income countries, accreditation of labs is often not required. This can lead to a proliferation of labs of variable quality, with results which are not reliable as a basis for treatment

THE TIERED LAB SYSTEM – A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?
In order to make best use of scarce resources, various groups have proposed a system of integrated tiered labs as the way for low and lower-middle income countries to build their pathology systems (Fleming et al 2016; WHO 2008).

The staffing and functions increase going from the Tier 1 lab (in a primary health care centre) to a Tier 2 lab (at a first-level hospital) to a Tier 3 lab (in a referral hospital).

The system is also supported by a reference lab or a Tier 3+ lab, which undertakes specialized tests and functions such as disease surveillance and investigation of antimicrobial resistance. The reference lab may be shared regionally for small countries.

Figure 1. A schematic for a 3-tier lab system

SUCCESSFUL FUNCTIONING OF THE NETWORK REQUIRES:
- Good communication between the labs
- Timely transmission of results back to the lower tier facilities and to the patient
- Good laboratory information systems
- Pathologists guide test selection, quality, and results interpretation throughout

IS POINT-OF-CARE TESTING A “LEAP FROG” SOLUTION?

Advantages of point-of-care (PoC) tests
- **Speed**
  - PoC test results are quicker
  - Important in emergency (cardiac, sepsis), or if loss-to-follow-up is important (HIV)
- **Some More Accurate**
  - DNA test for cervical cancer, compared to cytology
- **Some Lower Cost**
  - Some PoC tests cost the same or less than conventional lab tests (Hepatitis C, NAAT test for syphilis)
  - Can be more cost effective than lab tests when ordered in low volumes

Disadvantages of point-of-care (PoC) tests
- **Resource Allocation**
  - PoC tests can waste resources if results not used in prescribing or patients don’t change behavior when self-monitoring (INR, blood glucose)
- **Some Less Accurate**
  - Some PoC tests are less accurate (glucometers at ends of the ranges)
- **Some Higher Cost**
  - Some PoC tests are more costly than lab tests (RDTs for malaria, CD4 test for HIV, MDR-TB, INR test for blood clotting time, blood glucose test)
  - Single use kits are more expensive than batch reagents

**Point-of-care tests do not eliminate the need for trained pathologists – trained professionals are essential to deciding which of competing tests to use, to ensure that hand-held devices such as glucometers are properly calibrated, and to ensure that tests are used in the appropriate circumstances.**

DEVELOPING A PATHOLOGY SYSTEM: THE EXAMPLE OF MALAYSIA

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Progress</th>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>Upon independence, Malaysia lost 75% of the staff of the Institute for Medical Research, when expatriates left</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>Set up first training program in the country: previously all training was in the UK – costly, and not all trainees returned. Only 30 pathologists in country.</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Upgraded the Master’s of Pathology from a 2-year to a 4-year program to meet growing scientific needs</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Although number of pathologists had risen to 120, still did not meet needs. Universities and Ministry of Health joined forces to train more pathologists</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Over 500 pathologists, and Malaysia trains pathologists for at least five other countries</td>
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Accreditation
Instead of using costly foreign accreditation agencies, Malaysia developed an accreditation system by agreement between the Department of Standards Malaysia, and the College of Pathologists Malaysia, using ISO 15189 (Medical Laboratories). Malaysia invested in training lead and technical assessors using an international Accreditation agency. With public support, the 2007 Pathology Lab Act was passed.

Payment for Diagnostic Tests
Malaysia has a mixed public and private health insurance system. The government allocates 4.75% of GDP for health, out-of-pocket spending for health has reduced to 30.7%, there are safety nets for vulnerable population, and a tax-based system which pools risk. This falls within the WHO Health Financing strategy framework for the Asia Pacific Region 2002-2015 (Chua and Cheah, 2012).

NEXT STEPS

Is it time for a global diagnostic alliance?

REFERENCES


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