

Editorial

Premature Deaths: The Affluent and the Hapless

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Editor

Being well-off does not necessarily promise a long and healthy life as both poverty and affluence contribute to the causes of preventable or premature deaths.

One of the more interesting concepts in medicine is of the 'prevention of premature deaths'. Putting aside the effects of trauma and accidents, the two other major causes of preventable deaths are poverty and affluence.

One of the most dangerous points in a human life is birth. This is dangerous especially for the mother but also for the child. Maternal and child mortality continue to be a major problem especially in poor countries including Pakistan. However, it is interesting to note that more than a century ago, child birth was equally dangerous for the rich as well as the poor.

Even in modern medical literature the period before delivery of a child is often referred to as the 'confinement'

That is a serious problem; women that are active until the time of delivery of a child have a better chance of going through an uneventful delivery. The well to do that are confined to bed and away from the time, do worse. Child birth is hard work and those that are used to hard work, do better.

There is an interesting story of an obstetrician in Vienna during the nineteenth century called Ignaz Semmelweis. He made an important observation about the occurrence of puerperal sepsis (infection during child birth that was often fatal). What Semmelweis noticed was that 11 women who had 'street births' or in other words were too poor to come to a hospital had a much lower chance of getting infected than those who delivered their babies in a hospital.

What Semmelweis realized and that is a seminal observation in medical history was that women who delivered babies in the hospital were taken care of by doctors who would come down from the 'autopsy rooms' and deliver babies without washing their hands. As such they transmitted infection from the dead to the living. By instituting the regimen of washing hands before delivering a baby, Semmelweis was able to cut down tremendously on the incidence of infection.

But then being ahead of your time is never good. Since Semmelweis could not prove why washing

hands was good, he was ostracized and rejected by the Physicians who thought that washing hands before delivering a baby was beneath their dignity. Germs as cause of infection; was yet in the future and after being rejected, Semmelweis fell apart and eventually died in a 'mental asylum' after being beaten up.

Today, child birth is still fraught with danger among the poor. First, because of 'child marriages'. When 'children' get pregnant they are often just not physically developed enough to go through a normal delivery. Second, during child birth, medical help, including the possibility of a 'caesarean section,' is not available. Third, the child after a prolonged labor is often not well enough and neither is the mother and without medical help both might not survive.

There are two other factors that increase maternal and child mortality. First is inappropriate nutrition for the mother, most if not all poor women going into child birth are severely deficient in terms of blood strength (anemia) and even a moderate amount of bleeding during delivery of a child can push them into severe medical problems that they might not recover from. And if the mother is not around or is too sick, the child will also have a hard time surviving.

Once the child is born and is well at birth, there are other problems in store. The first is malnutrition. Malnutrition in poor countries remains a major cause of early (preventable) death. But even if a child gets adequate nutrition, the fight for survival has just begun.

Overcrowding, unsanitary surroundings, inadequate access to clean drinking water, lack of education, and almost no access to primary medical care and immunization all contribute to early deaths. Adequate 'education' especially of the mothers could very well, prevent many of these problems.

Overcrowding has an interesting history. Pulmonary Tuberculosis (TB) was the scourge for the last few centuries. TB was called the 'white plague,' it was seen as a 'romantic' disease that infected people of a 'sensitive' nature. To name two victims, first is the famous poet, John Keats, the second of course is Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Interestingly, even before the definitive antibiotic treatment for TB was discovered, in the middle of the last century, the incidence of TB was rapidly

declining and this was due to the fact that overcrowding became less common especially among the well to do and as such, transmission of this disease from person to person became less common.

And, now, the diseases particular to the well-off; that have become a scourge of the modern world, of these, two are worth mentioning. First is what we call Adult onset Diabetes (Type II Diabetes) that is almost entirely due to the increasing consumption of refined starches and sugars and the entailing obesity. The second is blockages of heart arteries leading to heart attacks.

Besides Diabetes and obesity, the most important predisposing factor for blockages of the heart arteries is a lack of physical activity, once again the result of a life style that can only be sustained by the

affluent. Unfortunately, being well off does not necessarily promise a long and healthy life. In most developing and developed countries, Diabetes and heart disease are now the major causes of preventable deaths, especially among the emerging middle class. Interestingly, it is the newly affluent who are much more prone to dietary excess.

That leaves two types of disease that make up the second tier of preventable or premature deaths. First is 'cancer,' which, frankly if we did not live long enough, most of us would never even develop cancers. It is for this reason that cancers do not come in as a major cause of premature death in poor and developing countries. The other category is of diseases associated with aging. Here, again, you have to live long enough to develop these conditions.

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