

# Evaluating Awareness of Pediatricians and General Practitioners on Transformation of the Health System in Iran

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**Abstract-** In orders to promote the level of healthcare in societies, governments try to have different policies to transform the health system. The aim of this study was to measure the level of awareness of practitioners in Iran, after initiating the new transformation of the health system in the country, starting from May 2014. This is a descriptive–cross-sectional study, which was inducted in October 2014. The study population consists of 208 physicians who attended the 26<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Pediatrics in Tehran, Iran. Data was collected using a self-structured questionnaire, which was estimated as both reliable and valid. Two hundred and eight questionnaires were returned. The results showed that 79.1% of the practitioners were aware of the new health system. Indeed 48.3% of the participants believed that the system was successful. 57.7% of physicians were completely aware of the time of the new system settlement in the country, while the rest had either no idea or did not know the exact date. The participants suggested a few items promote the health system in the country; among them, decreasing the direct payment between patients and physicians was suggested most frequently. According to the results obtained from the study, it is suggested that health care administrators have a detailed plan for health care workers prior to settlement of a new health policy installment, in order to succeed in settlement of a program.

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## Introduction

In order to ensure peoples' utilization of high-quality health services, one important concern of any government is identifying, establishing, and using methods to promote health systems and reduce individual/social risks affecting health (1).

One of the general orientations of the health system is giving fairer and higher quality health services based on the family physician program and the referral system to all members of the society. The new health development plan has taken major steps in this area (2).

In Iran, the Family physician program has been presented as a special and innovative model by the Ministry of Health aiming to reform the health system, and despite being successful, has been a challenging

issue (3).

One of the most important achievements of knowledge transformation is being successful in the development of health care and treatment process: at these four levels: the quality of patient care, professional practices, health system and community (4).

Nevertheless, lack of awareness and scientific evidence has been one of the problems in news and information presentation in the field of health. Increasing knowledge, being informed about health issues and the ability to research has a significant impact on the production of high-quality health news and its perception by the public. Therefore, the existence of a systematic approach to these factors is necessary to achieve the main goal of the new health system (5).

Also, executive officers in the health system should

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have a plan to identify the true needs of the population and try to improve the system with more commitment and motivation (6).

Considering that promoting the level of public health has been one of the most fundamental objectives by which we aim to promote the healthcare reform planning our country, we have tried to achieve this aim by implementing the first phase of the plan in governmental hospitals all over the country. Financial protection of citizens against health costs, with special attention to vulnerable groups of society, has been one of the major goals of the government through the organization of hospital services and reducing the patients' out of pocket payments in affiliated hospitals to the Ministry of Health. According to the instructions and regulations related to the program, it was developed and announced and put into effect starting from 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2014 in hospitals.

This program consisted of eight service packages in the field of treatment, including reducing the patient's payment in governmental hospitals, supporting sustainability physicians in deprived areas, the presence of resident physicians in governmental hospitals, hoteling quality improvement in governmental hospitals, improving the quality of medical examination services in governmental hospitals, promoting the natural childbirth program, financial aid to certain incurable and poor patients and also establishment of an air emergency service was drafted and gradually put into execution (7).

However, giving full and sufficient information to users, especially doctors and other health care workers is of particular importance. According to this new plan, one of the major concerns has been informing doctors and health center workers of basic information on the new plan. In this study, the level of awareness of doctors in Iran was measured, six months after the program was started.

## Materials and Methods

In this study, a questionnaire was distributed among physicians who attended the 26th international congress of pediatrics, held during 14-18 October 2014 in Children's Medical hospital Center conference hall. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were handed out, and two hundred and eight were returned, and collected data was analyzed by SPSS 18 software using descriptive and analytical statistics.

The physicians completed questionnaires containing two parts: descriptive and technical information. Questions with specific correct answers included five questions. Two were respectively about whether or not

they are aware of the new health system and whether they are aware of the implementation time of the new system. One was assessing the applicants' awareness on the reduction of the direct payment between patients and system which has been one of main objectives and was proposed as a suggestion in order to enhance the reform of the health care system. Two others were multiple choice questions with four choices which assessed the applicants' knowledge on Hospitals Evaluation Criteria and Clinical Governance which were two major points of the program. One other question with no specific correct answer was asked in order to obtain the applicant's opinion on whether they believe the system was successful.

In this research, the questionnaire was revised by a number of experts after being prepared, thus enhancing its validity. After gathering the experts' opinions, corrective actions were taken.

## Results

In this study, two hundred and eight participants (53.6% male and 46.4% female with a mean age of  $43.6 \pm 11.8$  year old.) participated. The physicians had been engaged in clinical practice for about  $16.5 \pm 10.9$  years. Among all participants, 15 (8.6%) were general practitioners, 27 (15.5%) were pediatric residents, 28 (16.1%) were Fellowship Assistants, 77 (44.3%) were Pediatricians and 27 (15.5%) were Professors of Pediatrics. Among these participants, 41 (24.4%) were faculty members.

According to our questionnaire about the level of awareness on the new health system, 163 (79.1%) of participants were aware of the new health system, while 43 (20.1%) of participants weren't aware of the plan. Also, 98 (48.3%) of participants saw the new health system as a successful plan. However, 23 (13.3%) of participants saw the new health system as a failed plan and 78 (38.4%) percent had no opinion in this regard.

Number of 120 (57.7%) of participants knew the exact time of implementation of the new health care system. Also, 143 (68.8%) of participants stated the correct decrease in the out of pocket patient payment from the total cost of hospitalization.

Most choice suggested by the participants was "reduction of direct payment relationship between patients and health care system." This was suggested by 62 people (29.8% of participants).

While 41 participants (19.7%) have suggested "Modifying referral system," 31 participants (14.9%) "Increasing the cost of physician's incoming services"

and 29 participants (13.9%) “Decreasing the patient’s payment” Forty-five participants (21.6 %) did not answer this question.

Seventy-six (86.4%) of participants who were employed in the government sector were aware of the new health system, while only 24 (68.6%) of participants who were employed in private sector and 38 (79.2%) of participants who worked in both sectors were aware of the new health system. There was no statistically significant difference ( $P=0.075$ ).

Fifty-two (59.1%) of participants who were employed in the government sector and 11 (31.4%) of participants who were employed in the private sector felt that the new health system had been successful. Twenty-one (43.8%) of participants who worked in both sectors felt the new health system had been successful ( $P=0.049$ ). This showed a significant statistical difference between groups.

Compared to other groups, faculty members were significantly more familiar with the new health system. Thirty-eight (95%) of faculty members were familiar with the plan. However, 94 (74.6 percent) of non-faculty members were familiar with the new healthcare reform ( $P=0.005$ ).

Twenty-six (66.7%) of faculty members considered the new health system successful. While 50 (39.4%) of other participants saw the new health system as successful plan ( $P=0.011$ ).

Regarding the date of the new health system in the

country, 91 (78 percent) of participants who were working in the governmental sectors, gave the correct answer which was the Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2014, however, only 14 (56 percent) of participants who were involved in private sectors, gave the correct answer. One-hundred and five (65.9%) of those working in both governmental and private sectors, gave the correct answer however the difference was not statistically significant ( $P=0.287$ ). The study on faculty or non-faculty members showed that 27 (79.4%) of faculty members gave the correct date as an answer, while among non-faculty members 97 (65.4%) were aware of the correct date. The difference was not statistically significant ( $P=0.243$ ).

Most correct answers to this question were given by Pediatric Subspecialists (91.7%), Pediatricians (88.9%), Fellowship Assistants (80.8%) and Pediatrics Residents (74.2%), respectively. General practitioners who answered correctly are less than 50% (46.2 percent) and had the lowest rate of correct answer among mentioned groups.

Table 1 shows the results of the statistical analysis of suggestions for reforming the health care system, collected from the participants working in governmental and/or private sectors; there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups ( $P=0.6$ ). According to Table 2, the results of the statistical analysis of suggestions for reforming the health care system, there was also not a statistically significant difference between the faculty and non-faculty members ( $P=0.602$ ).

**Table 1. Participants suggestions for reforming the health system in the country**

	Reduction the costs paid by patients	Increasing tariffs and Physician’s incomes	Reduction of direct payment between the patients and health systems	Reforming the referral system
<b>Working in the Governmental sector</b>	12 (16.4%)	15 (20.5%)	28 (38.4%)	18 (24.7%)
<b>Working in Private sectors</b>	8 (28.6%)	5 (17.9%)	8 (28.6%)	7 (25%)
<b>Working in both Governmental and Private sectors</b>	6 (16.7%)	6 (16.7%)	18 (50%)	6 (16.7%)
<b>General Results</b>	26 (19%)	26 (19%)	54 (39.4%)	31 (22.6%)

*P*.Value= 0.6

**Table 2. Participants suggestions for reforming the health system in the country**

	Reduction the costs paid by patients	Increasing tariffs and physician’s incomes	Reduction of direct payment between the patients and health systems	Reforming the referral system
<b>Faculty members</b>	7 (25%)	5 (17.9%)	10 (35.7%)	6 (21.4%)
<b>Non-Faculty members</b>	15 (14.3%)	20 (19%)	44 (41.9%)	26 (24.8%)
<b>General results</b>	22 (16.5%)	25 (18.8%)	54 (40.6%)	32 (24.1%)

*P*.Value=0.602

However, the results of the statistical analysis of suggestions to reform the health care system, showed that there was a statistically significant difference between respondents with different educational levels ( $P=0.021$ ).

### Discussion

In this study it was shown that 86 percent (76 of 88) of physicians who were employed in governmental sectors were familiar with the new health system and more than half of them believed the new health system was a successful plan, while about two-thirds of (24 of 35) physicians involved in private sectors, were familiar with the new health system and less than a third of them believed this new health system was a successful plan.

According to the results obtained from this section, it seems that people involved in private sectors were not quite familiar with the new health system in the country, and it is likely that implementation of the Non-refoulement plan in private sectors of the country has an important role in creating this difference. In comparison with other groups, faculty members were significantly more familiar with the new health system. Ninety-five percent (38 of 40) of faculty members were familiar with the new health system. Thus, we conclude that during the implementation of the plan in governmental sectors; faculty members were familiar with the plan. And also, they have taken great steps in order to advance the goals of the health system in the country.

As it was mentioned, practitioners, faculty members and staff of governmental sectors, have more exact information about the date of implementation of the new health system in the country.

Based on the above findings, we also discovered a difference between governmental and private sectors regarding the knowledge on the reduction of the total fees paid by patients in the hospital. As far as about 78 percent (67 of 85) of physicians working in governmental sectors versus 58 percent (17 of 29) of physicians working in private sectors knew the fact that patients visiting a governmental hospital will pay just 10 percent of total costs and that reduction of direct payment between patients and health system, which is one of the primary goals of the new health system, has been achieved.

Due to the significant statistical difference, it could be concluded, those who are employed in governmental sectors and have higher academic levels in their country,

are more familiar with the new health system compared to those involved in non-governmental sectors and those with lower social status. This means that establishment of the new health system increased awareness among physicians in governmental sectors significantly.

Considerable differences among physicians with different levels of education, regarding suggestions for reforming the new health system, showed that the higher the level of physicians education and social involvement in hospitals, the more they believed that reduction of direct payment between the patients and the health system should be one of the most important objectives of the new healthcare.

Regardless of the physician's workplace being governmental or non-governmental and whether being a faculty member or not, the majority of the respondent's stated reduction of direct payment between patients and healthcare systems as the first priority in order to reform the system. At last, respectively, reforming the referral system, Reduction of total costs paid by patients and Increasing tariffs and physician's incomes were the next suggestions physicians made for reforming the health system in the country.

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