Adolescent Health: An Unmet Demand of Time

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WHO defines adolescents as persons between 10-19 years of age. They are a large and growing segment of global population. Many countries in the world are undergoing demographic transition and therefore today’s world is facing the largest generation of adolescents ever in history. In Bangladesh, about 23% of the total population is adolescent (Population Census 2001)\(^1\).

Health and wellbeing of adolescents are challenged by several environmental factors, including family, peer group, school, neighbourhood, socioeconomic status, political instability, and sociocultural factors.\(^2\) They frequently indulge in health-related risky behavior with widespread consequences. More than 33 percent of the disease burden and almost 60 percent of premature deaths among adults stem from risky behavior and conditions adopted during period of adolescence (WHO 2002).\(^3\) Many such risk processes that lead to chronic non-communicable diseases in later life, include tobacco, alcohol, and illicit substance misuse, unsafe sex, malnutrition, obesity, and lack of physical activity \(^4,5\). Besides health consequence, these issues often bring familial sufferings and disharmony, social unrest and thus disrupt peace in society.

Adolescence-related risk factors are existent across the world although their magnitude varies from country to country. Health need of this young generation is poorly addressed by existing social attitude and current health programmes. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have incorporated only sexual and reproductive health issue\(^6\). A growing concern of immense public health importance has emerged considering the potential impact of unhealthy behaviours practiced by adolescents. Therefore diseases experienced during adolescence and risk factors with their roots in adolescence should be focused for attention.

Globally, adolescents are the most vulnerable group of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases (STD) including HIV/AIDS. Of the reported cases of HIV infection half occur in people under age 25. (UNAIDS 2003)\(^7\). This vulnerability is related to lack of knowledge regarding safe reproductive health, safe sexual behaviour\(^8\) and health seeking behaviour for reproductive health (RH) illnesses\(^9\). Rapid urbanization, increased sexual behaviour and prostitution involving adolescent girls has began to fuel STD and HIV transmission in some part of the world\(^10\). Unsafe/unprotected sexual behavior also put adolescent girls at risk of unintended teen-age pregnancy, iatrogenic abortion, genital tract hemorrhage and infection, contributing to high Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) and a high infant mortality rate (IMR)\(^11\).

Substance abuse among adolescents is a growing concern for the family, society, and the nation. Tobacco is widely abused substance among adolescents worldwide. An estimated 15 percent of young men and 7 percent of women age 13 to 15 are currently smokers across the world\(^12\). In Bangladesh, about 29% of the adolescent students in Dhaka city and 68% of the slum dwellers in Dhaka are regular smokers\(^13\). Death has been predicted in 50% of 300 million current young smokers\(^14\).

Drug addiction is a glooming catastrophe. The number of drug addicts in Bangladesh is rising alarmingly and at present, there are millions of drug addict, adolescents hold a major share and they are from all level of the society\(^15\). Frequently abused drugs are heroin, marijuana, cannabis (ganja), amphetamine, alcohol, opium, phensedyl, cocaine, YABA. In addition to health hazards like physical and psychological dependence, even death, social effect of this abuse is enormous. Approximately 70 percent of crimes including theft, robbery, kidnapping, murder are directly or indirectly related to drugs\(^16\). It also affects family works and schooling.

There is high prevalence unsatisfactory nutrition among adolescents. A large number of adolescents
Adolescents are important family, social and national asset. Health outcomes for adolescents and young
adults are grounded in their social environments and are frequently mediated by their behaviors. This phase of life if nurtured will contribute to prosperity but if neglected will have serious repercussions on the individual’s health and well being as well as an adverse effect on the national economy and development. Therefore addressing adolescent health is an unmet demand of present time.

References:
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