STRENGTHENING THE HEALTH SYSTEM FOR IMPROVED HEALTH PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION DURING COVID-19:

Leveraging a Performance Monitoring Team for pandemic response in an Ethiopian Woreda Health Office

On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a public health emergency of international concern. Global and individual health systems are still deep in battle to combat the spread of the virus, and Ethiopia is no exception. Ethiopia's Ministry of Health (MOH) reported its first confirmed case in Addis Ababa on March 13. Across the country, health officials are taking aggressive measures to contain the spread of the virus, including in areas that are more susceptible for transmission, like the Wogera Woreda Health Office (WorHO), a health administrative unit in the Amhara region.

Preparations for a COVID-19 response had a particular sense of urgency in the Wogera woreda, as it shares a long border with Sudan and experienced a high volume of individuals returning from across the Middle East, including places where infection rates were high. Noting this potential risk very early on, the WorHO established a multi-sector COVID-19 Response Taskforce comprised of various stakeholders in the woreda.

STRENGTHENING THE WOREDA HEALTH SYSTEM

The WorHO prioritized the need for robust community surveillance and tracking to monitor and control the outbreak in the woreda. They decided to tap into existing capabilities and resources, created through the Capacity Building and Mentorship Program (CBMP), a project funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and implemented by University of Gonder in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ethiopia Data Use Partnership. Implemented in ten woredas throughout the country, the project's primary focus is to improve data quality and use for informed decision-making and improving the quality of health care through efficient performance monitoring and establishing the capacity and systems needed for research and evaluation.

One of the CBMP's techniques is to focus on enhancing Performance Monitoring Teams (PMTs). Efficient PMTs usually lead to improved healthcare performance, as they are a group formed within a health facility that regularly and systematically monitors and appraises the performance of their respective health facility against annual targets. Importantly, PMTs also directly tackle issues in data inaccuracy and low performance and/or delayed accomplishments through an established process of problem identification, root cause analysis, intervention design and implementation. Through CBMP, the University of Gondar provided continuous mentorship and supportive supervision to the Wogera WorHO that transformed its PMT, which had been previously inactive.

Since its participation in CBMP, the Wogera PMT has been rebooted and actively involved in solving health service performance challenges. The reactivation of the PMT incorporated strategic and improved problem solving techniques within the WorHO and helped to develop a more skillful and knowledgeable workforce ready to methodically and successfully grapple with critical health crises.

ADAPTING EXISTING RESOURCES TO FIGHT COVID-19

The Wogera COVID-19 Response Taskforce looked to lessons from previous experiences and existing infrastructure while preparing for the possible outbreak in the woreda. What CBMP brought to the WorHO proved valuable and the taskforce is using the infrastructure, approach, experiences, and workforce skills from the PMT to identify and trace suspected COVID-19 cases. Additionally, the revived PMT instituted strong and robust community data collection, analysis, and contact documentation, which lend itself to COVID-19 containment efforts in identifying and isolating returning individuals and suspected cases in a mandatory quarantine.

Using the PMT approach, the taskforce has been productive and conducted community education in basic hand sanitation, fundraising, and home-to-home surveillance among other activities. Wogera is also one of the few woredas that is regarded as being well prepared to handle a worst case scenario; however, to date, the community is free from COVID-19 and regular health services are maintained with strict preventative measures in place, largely thanks to its strong community and data-based approach in prevention.

Wogera's experience is a lesson on how a well-functioning PMT and an established culture of information use will not only lead to a strengthened health system that can adequately respond to routine health care services, but also to a health system that can protect its population during a pandemic, such as COVID-19 and other unforeseen health crises.

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