

Social Health Clubs: uniting for the health of the society

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Education is for life! This one sentence can have two meanings. One is that education as a process continues for the entire span of a person's life. It is not restricted to those days which are associated with an educational institution. Second, that education is not just for finding a livelihood-learning and being financially secure. It is about being a value-adding member of Society. It's about grooming himself/herself to be a patriotic and health-conscious citizen prepared to discharge his/ her fundamental duties and be of help to society at large.

Though both of these meanings are true in their own sense, it is about the second that we would like to elaborate on. The curriculum and environment in schools have seen many healthy movements over the years. However, the requirement of a healthy society in an exponential world is much more dynamic than what could be incorporated into the curriculum. Thereby, it leaves us with the option of having some dynamic entity in the environment of the educational institutions which will equip the students and society to be better informed. Apart from information, a platform that they consider their own can help the students productively participate in the discourse that shapes the morrow. Education should be able to guide on the new ways to go about social life given the realities of the increasing obesity and diabetes pandemic - on how you eat your food, live your life and celebrate birthdays! It should be able to guard a generation from the advertisement blizz of Ultra Processed Foods.

It is in the above context that the novel experiment of Social Health Clubs in educational institutions deserves a mention. Social Health Clubs have been formed in about twenty-odd schools across India as this is being written. More importantly, it offers each of you reading this, a point of action-constituting or facilitating a Social Health Club in your area of influence. It might be your school/college or your alma mater. It might be the school you are teaching in or the ones for which your kids are packing their bags.

Social Health Clubs are conceptualised as decentralized and self-driven entities at the level of educational institutions. Students come together to form the club with the teachers/parents as patrons. This club is then envisaged to provide a platform for the various activities of students which might include, but are not restricted to, competitions, symposiums, plays, occasions, and any other.

The concept of Social Health is more inclined toward the promotional and preventive aspects of healthcare rather than the curative side. It seeks to instill the perspective that health as a goal needs to be sought with a 'society as a whole' approach and cannot be restricted to the individual health of a person. This perspective enables the platform to look deeper into the socially communicable diseases which are today euphemistically called non-communicable diseases. Some reports suggest that sixty percent of the deaths in India are now due to such socially communicated diseases. The activities of the Social Health Clubs can help highlight and address this aspect. Once the platform is made and is available to the students, it can help them chart a course on multifarious social issues that need attention – an elaboration of the various issues that could be addressed would be too long to be attempted in this short article.

The hope with Social Health Clubs is also because of the impact that it has started to have. On July 7th, some very reputed schools had given in to celebrating World Chocolate Day without realizing how they are being made use of by vested commercial interests. Students were made to decorate cookies with sugary chocolate syrup inadvertently promoting amongst themselves Ultra-Processed Foods which are now known to have the most drastic impact on health. However, on the very same day, armed with a general mandate to promote Social Health, the Social Health Club in Kendriya Vidyalaya, Jyotipuram, UT of J&K celebrated 'Healthy Food' Day. Students were requested to bring to the school what they thought of as healthy food. The riot of colours that they saw on each other's tiffin boxes with various fruits and vegetables was in stark contrast to the schools which had de-educated their students by celebrating an occasion sponsored by vested commercial interests.

This is just the beginning. Concerted action by the society can ensure that there is more traction for the concept and more visibility for the efforts that the Clubs do. Individuals and organizations can contribute their might to this noble cause.

Education is for life - that of your own and of others. It brings about your personality, values, and the leader in you. It helps you follow the right causes in the right earnest. For a society to promote its own education, it has to radically improvise the structures and processes. It will take you and me to make that change!

Justice MR Hariharan Nair retired as a Judge of the High Court of Kerala

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The views are personal