

## Ethiopia changes child mortality policy after visit to SEARCH

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**PUNE:** Last year in November, a team of senior Ethiopian health officials had visited SEARCH (Society For Education, Action and Research in Community Health) in Shodhgram, Gadchiroli. Recently, the Amhara region in Ethiopia introduced major changes in its policy towards child mortality. The visit to SEARCH was the trigger for the change, said the Ethiopian regional health bureau.

The community health initiatives in tribal areas of Gadchiroli by SEARCH, set up by Dr Abhay and Dr Rani Bang in 1985, have brought a revolutionary change in the lives of the tribals. Empowerment of the tribal women to give primary treatment to pneumonia in children and also in their neonatal care was an important facet of the positive change.

“Ethiopia is a major contributor to neonatal and child deaths in the world. Similar to newborn in rural areas of Gadchiroli, pneumonia is one of the major reasons of child mortality there,” says Dr Abhay Bang, who had visited Ethiopia four years ago. “Ethiopia too faces the problem of overall backwardness and superstition among its population,” he adds.

In November last year, the Ethiopian government had sent a team of senior government health officials and programme managers to SEARCH for a five-day training. “In the past, their government was reluctant to allow local women, even trained to be Health Extension Workers (HEW), to use antibiotics to treat pneumonia in children. Politicians had to be convinced for this change,” says Bang.

The outlook changed after the visit to SEARCH by the delegation, including their national health director triggered the launch of a Community Case Management programme to treat pneumonia in children with the help of HEWs.

In a letter written to Bang, UNICEF Health Section Head in Addis Ababa, Luwei Pearson has said, “What convinced people here was intervention and results on the ground. The ‘living university’ continues to inspire people.”

Dr Abhay Bang says, “Community health initiatives from SEARCH have been recognised by the Planning Commission of India. They are highly recommended in the 11th Plan. But unfortunately Maharashtra government, which has recognised them in the past, has till now badly failed to implement them.