

My SEARCH Experience

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As an intern with the National Health System Resource Centre (NHSRC), the purpose of my visit to Gadchiroli was to observe and study the community processes in the outreach of government health programmes. Other than my internship with NHSRC, I was also hoping to identify a sector in the vast and constantly expanding field of 'development' which I can pursue in the future.

As we drove down to Shodhgram from Nagpur, the verdant foliage, the colourful specks of distant women in the paddy fields and the unending highway in front of us took my breath away. The rain had given everything around us a sense of freshness and seemed so rejuvenating. The Ashram exuded a sense of calm and peacefulness, while the winding red paths, thatched huts and shady trees seemed to promise an unforgettable experience.

On our first day here, we caught a glimpse of the community life where everyone comes together for the evening prayers followed by dinner in the Moha Mauli. There was a sense of belonging in the ashram which made it feel like a family home. Our visit began with a tour of the hospital and on hearing the story of its inception, both Shruti and I were struck by the very ingenious but simple idea of asking the patients, the tribals, what they would like the hospital to be like. This reflected not only involving the local community in the organization's work but making them feel respected and accepted. At the core of any community process lies what Dr. Bang mentioned in one of his speeches - "one must work *with* the people and not *for* them".

Next, we were introduced to the adolescent and sexual health program. Adolescent and sexual health is a sensitive issue even in the big cities of India and I can only imagine what a taboo it must have been here. Educating the youth about their bodies and safe sexual relations is of utmost importance. In the UK, even now, the government is struggling to deal with the rise in teenage pregnancies and the myriad complications that accompany them. Something that caught my attention in this adolescent program was how education and health go hand in hand. Awareness and knowledge are of utmost importance today and this is where I feel the government should play its part. Incorporating sexual education into the national curriculum and ensuring its implementation is of vital importance.

The de-addiction program targeted students and educated them about the ill-effects of tobacco. While observing the de-addiction program, it struck me that lack of education is the cause of most problems in a developing nation. One of the root causes of this addiction was the lack of knowledge about the ills of tobacco and its products. It emerged again that education lies at the heart of any good public health policy or program, and it can help nip several health issues in the bud.

SEARCH's neonatal care program has to be seen, to be believed. To imagine that rural women who have just passed class eight, have played an integral part in reducing the infant mortality rate by half, is a feat our nation should be immensely proud of. As part of my internship with NHSRC, I will be traveling to Chattisgarh to study the 'Mitani' program, which I believe stems from SEARCH's HBNC research. This particular program really inspired me because it utilizes our own resources (rural women), maximizes their potential (with training) and makes the community self-reliant. They are now in a position to take care of their own women and children, which I believe will give them the strength and confidence to grow and flourish.

The key to the success of the work done here was very clearly the thoroughness of the research conducted and the strength of the studies. While studying Psychology, 'Research Methods' is a compulsory module throughout the three years of our degree. The past two years never made me realize the importance of research as these past two days have. Terms like 'multiple-factor analysis' or 'confounding variables' suddenly seemed much more important. Multiple factor analysis is a procedure definitely worth knowing if one can list upto eighteen causes of a neonate's death. Confounding variables too mean something, when it is not the lack of food causing malnutrition in the baby, but the belief that a well fed mother will lead to a 'big' child causing complications at work.

Linking this to government programs and having sound data is the starting point for the formation of any given policy. Even though I came here to observe community processes in government health programs, sometimes it seems as if SEARCH is doing what the government should be doing. Of course one cannot forget that in a country like ours, with such a vast and varied population, it can sometimes be extremely difficult for the government to reach each one of its citizens. On the other hand, it should definitely incorporate the findings of organizations which have been able to penetrate the depths of India and use them to shape national policy.

We had heard about the Drs. Bang on several occasions; about their research, about their education, about their vision and their dreams. We had read about them in international journals and news articles and I imagined them to be extremely busy people who we might catch a glimpse of, if we were lucky. Everything we had heard and read, we saw in practice, except for the fact that it was the compassion, love and affection of the Doctors and their team which made SEARCH the special organization that it is. They have identified the causes of disease and death unique to our country and have used our own tools and resources to combat them. At Shodhgram, there is a sense of family, dedication and honesty of purpose which I can only hope to achieve in the field I choose to work in the future.