

Why do some small countries have better health outcomes?
Lessons for larger countries and economies

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Questions about rising healthcare costs and hence the health system's sustainability have been major challenges facing many health systems worldwide. Some policymakers and researchers are taking more serious looks at those countries or economies where the health system is spending much less money per capita and as a share of its Gross Domestic Products and producing seemingly just as impressive if not better health outcomes than big spenders such as the United States.

The ones that fit the former category seem to be small entities and are economic power houses; e.g., Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. These economies are indeed spending less money on a per capita basis on health but achieving top ranking health outcome. Why? In pursuing an answer to that end, it should be worthwhile to note the following:

- As compared to the OECD countries, the government's share of total health expenditure was among the lowest and their residents were the least obese or overweight.
- The health system has gone through either a financing reform or an infrastructure reform.
- All their health systems offer either universal coverage or relatively barrier free comprehensive public health services.

But these health systems are also facing challenges of their own: rising healthcare costs and increasing public pressure to contribute more government funding. To address such challenges, it will be imperative to have in place effective oversight of the health system. The system should have barrier free access to well coordinated care, be creative in value creation for services and ensure that effective leadership and management are instituted at all levels of the system or healthcare organization. There should also be a concerted effort to enhance productivity and develop healthcare into an engine for economic growth.

For healthcare leaders or change agents, it should be remembered that:

“Health care itself is more than a commodity, it is a personal healing activity and [should be] carried out through institutions that embody values such as respect for persons, the value of human life, and duties to care for suffering individuals.” (David C. Thomasma, 1996.)

The defining need in health systems development is to have and have developed healthcare leaders, executives and managers who are committed to helping people to lead long, healthy and productive lives and end with healthy aging and happy death. ❖