

Chapter 37

Implications for Poor Public Healthcare System of South Korea Revealed in MERS Outbreak

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to prevent the possible recurrence of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) by understanding the status of South Korea's public healthcare system through a literature review. In addition, it presents measures to reinforce the public health system by analyzing the roles and limitations of the health authority, which plays a key role in preventing the spread of this infectious disease, through their response to the recent MERS outbreak in the country. Based on the analysis, the results showed the following implications: (1) Community health centers need to expand and reinforce their functions. It is important to publish response manuals at the national level and regularly educate and train medical service providers on infectious disease control, especially against diseases such as MERS. Accordingly, manpower and facilities must be developed. (2) Public hospitals located in regional hubs must expand to establish a public healthcare system. Public healthcare and emergency healthcare systems should be established by connecting community health centers, regional hub hospitals, and national university hospitals. The improvements in the facility must be supported to help increase the efficiency of public health system. (3) Awareness among people must increase with respect to the prevention of infectious diseases and managing direct contact with infected patients. Most importantly, education and training on infectious disease prevention must be regularly provided to the public, and social support systems and programs must be organized for the infected people who are in self-isolation.

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INTRODUCTION

(Body Text, Times New Roman, 12 pt, left justified) In May 2015, South Korea experienced the outbreak of MERS or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), an epidemic disease that originated far away from the Arabian Peninsula. The first confirmed case of MERS in South Korea was observed on May 11. Within two months, 186 MERS cases were identified in the country. The death toll rose to 38 patients and about 16,000 patients were in isolation (The Korea Herald, 2015; Herald Business, 2016; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2016; Korean Medical Association and Korean Academy of Medical Sciences, 2016). South Korea was recognized for its advanced medical healthcare system; however, with the spread of MERS, the healthcare system was reduced as being underdeveloped. Moreover, the economic impact is estimated at a loss of about KRW 10 trillion. The important reasons for this include the underdeveloped healthcare system with inadequate measures against infectious diseases and the low capacity in public healthcare institutions, such as community healthcare centers and local medical centers (Herald Business, 2016; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2016). Public healthcare refers to the government interventions and activities to realize the public interest with respect to health (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2012). However, most South Korean public medical institutions are less competitive than private sector hospitals in realizing publicness, such as infectious disease prevention and treatment. This could be attributed to their continued operating deficit and purpose of public healthcare implementation. During the Park Geun-hye administration, the number of local public hospitals has been decreasing. For instance, the Jinju medical center, a local public hospital, has closed its doors. To prevent the recurrence of a situation such as that of MERS, this study conducted a literature review to diagnose the status of South Korea's public healthcare system. In addition, it examined the roles and limitations of healthcare, which plays a key role in preventing the spread of this infectious disease through their response to the recent MERS outbreak in the country. To this end, diverse literature was analyzed, including papers from domestic and international journals, government press releases, newspaper articles, healthcare statistics, white paper, and periodic publications.

OVERVIEW ON SOUTH KOREA'S PUBLIC HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Role of Public Healthcare and Public Healthcare Institutions

Government intervention is necessary in public healthcare for publicness and realization of public goods. Article 2 of the Public Health and Medical Services Act, established in 2000, states, "all activities of the State, local governments, and of public and medical institutions to ensure all citizens equal access to medical services and to protect and promote their health" (Public Health and Medical Services Act, 2000). Accordingly, healthcare and medical institutions are for the public and must (1) provide medical services to the low-income class, elderly, and physically challenged, (2) implement measures for infectious disease control and preventive healthcare projects against special diseases, such as tuberculosis and psychological disorders, and (3) services for national health protection and improvement. In South Korea, public healthcare institutions include community health centers that are run by public institutions, the branch offices of community health centers, healthcare centers, clinics, and general hospitals.

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