



PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE...



"I firmly believe that prevention is better than cure, and that is exactly what I have been practicing since 1991," claims Dr. Zakir Ali, District Coordinator for Preventive Programme, Bahawalpur, Punjab.

Bahawalpur is a challenging area for routine immunization due to its difficult terrain. Two thirds of the district are made up of the well-known Cholistan desert and parts of it are riverine belt, with a nomadic population whose movement is cumbersome to track.

In 1991, when the District Health Officer Bahawalpur was faced with the challenge of improving the immunization coverage from a mere 43%, he realized that his team needed a passionate individual who would go beyond the regular call of duty. On a visit to the Basic Health Unit of Union Council Jalalabad, he observed the devotion and untiring commitment with which Dr. Zakir Ali, a young Medical Officer in-charge of the BHU, was working to analyze and prevent the onset of Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPDs). Dr Zakir was monitoring the coverage of outreach vaccinators by travelling consistently to outreach sites himself, a task not included in his role, only because he wanted to ensure the vaccinators were following their micro-plans. He

observed that majority of the patients coming to the BHU were victims of VPDs, which could be prevented if vaccination coverage was improved. The DHO knew he had found the perfect candidate for the position of deputy DHO for the entire Bahawalpur district.

Dr Zakir was entrusted with the responsibility to lead preventive services of the District Health Authority Bahawalpur in 1992 and his main responsibility was supporting immunization under the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in his district. "When I joined the preventive services, I was worried about the coverage of outreach areas. These zones could not be reached without specific vehicles suitable for traveling in the harsh terrain and due to the population being nomadic. Moreover, there were no Lady Health Workers (LHWs) for these areas. I knew I had to come up with an out-of-the-box idea to increase outreach coverage," Dr Zakir recalled.

After extensive field travel and with the support of the Cholistan Development Authority, Dr Zakir and his team mapped the numbers and movement of the migratory population clusters in the desert and riverain areas. After analyzing the population movement and concentration in different areas, they were able to plan accordingly and devote resources relevantly to improve immunization services in various parts of Bahawalpur district.



Pertinent planning, consistent monitoring, and sharing of lessons-learnt and experiences between area supervisors led to the gradual improvement of immunization coverage to over 79% in a few years. but it was not enough for him. "I knew we could do better," said Dr Zakir, with a wide smile.

In 2017, he came up with an innovative plan - a unique collaboration between the DHA and the Livestock and Wildlife departments of the government. "I realized that these departments not only have access to the various population groups residing in the most difficult to reach areas but also have knowledge of vaccination. We pitched the idea to the Deputy Commissioner, and he directed these departments to assist us by allowing us to train their vaccinators on routine immunization as well. They also permitted our vaccinators to use the livestock dispensaries as fixed EPI centers and undertaking outreach visits through the Wildlife department's transport system. Hence we were able to cover the communities we could never reach before."

The elaborate plan of resource mobilization to maximize the benefits of the existing facilities was complemented by effective awareness raising communication campaigns to increase demand for routine immunization. This allowed Dr Zakir and his team to push the immunization coverage of Bahawalpur district to 91% in 2018. "I still believe in the power of prevention and that we can cover that remaining 9%," he laughed, "it is no longer a job, but a passion for me now."