

Cover Story



With the People, For the People - A century of community health in Sri Lanka

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Cover theme – The cover depicts Sri Lanka's dedicated, multidisciplinary community health workforce that has formed the backbone of the country's preventive health system for a century. Through their commitment, collaboration and trusted relationships with communities, they embody the centenary theme, “With the People, For the People” is celebrating a century of partnership in advancing the health and wellbeing of the nation.

Cover design – Dr Chamika Senanayake, Consultant in Health Informatics, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

Introduction

As Sri Lanka commemorates one hundred years of organized community health services, we celebrate a remarkable public health journey built on a simple yet powerful principle: health is achieved not only *for the people* but *with the people*¹. While healthcare systems provide infrastructure, services, medicines and policy support, lasting improvements in health occur when individuals and communities become active partners in shaping and sustaining health action. This people-centred approach has been central to Sri Lanka's community health achievements over the past century. This principle has contributed to many of the country's major public health successes, including reductions in maternal and infant mortality, control of communicable diseases, improvements in nutrition, increased life expectancy and better health outcomes across generations.



Building trust through communities

At the heart of these achievements is the extensive network of Medical Officer of Health (MOH) areas that covers the entire country. For decades, the MOH system has brought preventive healthcare services closer to communities, ensuring that essential public health interventions reach every village and household. Through regular outreach activities, clinics, home visits and community engagement, the MOH system has earned the trust and confidence of generations of Sri Lankans.

A defining feature of this relationship has been its person-centred approach. Public health professionals have worked closely with individuals and families through trust, empathy, mutual respect and an understanding of the social contexts in which people live. Rather than viewing communities as passive recipients of services, the system has empowered them to participate actively in decisions affecting their health and wellbeing. This has strengthened self-reliance, fostered community ownership and enhanced the sustainability of health programmes.

From community participation to collaboration

The success of community health extends beyond the health sector. Public health teams work closely with the education sector, social services, local authorities, community organizations, religious leaders, volunteers and many other stakeholders. Though belonging to different sectors, they are united by a shared commitment to improving community wellbeing.

As Sri Lanka enters its second century of community health, emerging challenges such as non-communicable diseases, population ageing, mental health concerns, climate change and new health threats require innovative and collaborative responses. This centenary is therefore not only a celebration of past achievements, but also a reaffirmation of a guiding principle for the future: improving health and wellbeing through collaborative action that is truly *with the people, for the people*.

References

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