

The Imperative of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the South-east Asian (SEA) Region

Karunathilake, I.M.¹, Marambe, K.², de Abrew, A.¹

Introduction

The Southeast Asian (SEA) Region, characterized by its diverse cultures, burgeoning economies, and dynamic workforce, faces a pivotal challenge in maintaining competitiveness and ensuring sustainable development in the health sector. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Region accounts for more than a quarter of the global population, spanning over 11 member states (WHO, 2024). Globalization and technological advancement have spearheaded health sector growth in the 21st century, the requirement for a highly skilled and adaptable workforce has become crucial. Rapid advances in medical technology, pharmacology, evidence-based practice etc. have led to a continuously evolving healthcare landscape. In this dynamic environment, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is essential for medical professionals to maintain and enhance their knowledge, skills, and competencies, and has become a mandated requirement for healthcare professionals to retain their credentials and right to practice. CPD encompasses the ongoing enhancement of knowledge, attitudes and skills that healthcare professionals engage in beyond their initial training, aimed at updating and advancing their knowledge, skills, and professional competency (Giri *et al.*, 2012).

¹Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

²Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Corresponding author: Prof. Indika Karunathilake
Email: indika@medarc.cmb.ac.lk

Importance of CPD for Medical Professionals

Enhancing Clinical Competence: CPD provides medical professionals with the opportunity to stay current with the latest clinical guidelines, medical technologies, and treatment protocols. Considering on an individual level, healthcare professionals can enhance their knowledge and skills i.e. understanding illnesses, best practices, and broader factors that affect health and care, and improve their clinical performance such as better adherence to guidelines and incorporating best practices (Allen *et al.*, 2019). Hence, this continuous learning process is essential for maintaining clinical competence and ensuring that healthcare providers can deliver evidence-based care (Allen *et al.*, 2019).

Improving Patient Outcomes: At the organizational level, such as in hospitals and educational institutions, CPD can lead to the development of new protocols and policies, as well as updated curricula and teaching methods for training healthcare professionals (Allen *et al.*, 2019). The study conducted by the Forsetlund *et al.* (2009) has shown a direct correlation between CPD and improved patient outcomes. Healthcare professionals who engage in regular CPD activities are more likely to adhere to best practices, reduce medical errors, and enhance the overall quality of care. Furthermore, CPD allows the healthcare workforce to adapt and more effectively address patients' needs and the constantly changing practice environment. This can ultimately result in improved care and better health outcomes (WHO, 2013).

Addressing Emerging Health Challenges: The SEA Region faces notable health challenges,

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emerging infectious diseases, dual burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and unequal distribution of resources. Well designed and accessible CPD programs can help medical professionals in the region to stay informed about these challenges and adopt appropriate strategies for prevention and mitigation (World Health Organization, 2021).

Promoting Professional Growth and Career Development: CPD is also crucial for the professional growth and career development of healthcare practitioners. It fosters a culture of lifelong learning and professional excellence, which is essential for career advancement and job satisfaction (Lockyer et al., 2009). Healthcare professionals may also gain more confidence in their roles, develop more positive attitudes towards certain patient groups and their colleagues or institutions, and expand their professional networks. This expanded network can lead to reduced feelings of isolation, a greater sense of belonging, and increased sharing of resources and information (Allen et al., 2019).

Challenges in Implementing CPD in the SEA Region

Resource Constraints: Many countries in the SEA Region face significant resource constraints, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified trainers. These factors pose substantial barriers to the effective implementation of CPD programs (Asia Pacific Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2020).

Diverse Healthcare Systems: The SEA Region is characterized by diverse healthcare systems, ranging from well-developed to under-resourced. Negative societal views of the healthcare profession, influenced by cultural, social, gender, and religious factors, along with limited opportunities for career advancement, have led to a declining interest in pursuing a career in medicine (Joarder et al., 2021). This diversity necessitates tailored CPD programs that can address the specific

needs and contexts of different countries (World Bank, 2020).

Regulatory and Policy Gaps: The absence of standardized regulatory frameworks and policies for CPD in many SEA countries hampers the development and enforcement of CPD requirements. Therefore, the guiding framework should integrate a regulatory viewpoint and a conceptual perspective that shapes CPD objectives and methods, while also taking into account contextual factors such as support for CPD, the healthcare context, and population health needs. Key steps to implement include: conducting a needs assessment; creating a policy outlining regulations (laws/norms), CPD requirements, and a monitoring approach with an accreditation mechanism; developing a financing plan; identifying and producing suitable CPD materials and activities; formulating a communication strategy; and establishing an evaluation process (Merry et al., 2023).

Lack of Awareness and Motivation: A lack of awareness on the importance of CPD among medical professionals and healthcare institutions has been reported in some parts of the Region (Vakani et al., 2024). Motivational barriers such as perceived irrelevance of CPD content and lack of incentives can deter participation (Rani et al., 2017). Merry et al., (2023) further highlight that in resource constrained countries such as Bangladesh, planning, development, and implementation of CPD systems were still underway and therefore, fragmented or prolonged timelines may result partially from inadequate leadership and/or insufficient motivation to establish a CPD system. Hence it is crucial for the SEA Region countries to establish and update their CPD systems in a timely manner.

Recommendations for Developing Robust CPD Systems

Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks: Governments and healthcare regulatory bodies in the SEA Region should develop and enforce comprehensive CPD policies that mandate regular participation in CPD activities

for all medical professionals. These policies should be aligned with international standards and tailored to local needs (WHO, 2018).

Investing in Infrastructure and Resources: Investment in CPD infrastructure, including training centers, e-learning platforms, and educational materials, is crucial. Partnerships with international organizations and donors can help to mobilize resources and expertise (Asia Pacific Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2020).

Fostering Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaboration between governments, healthcare institutions, professional associations, and international organizations is essential for the successful implementation of CPD programs. Engaging international partners can be beneficial as they bring expertise, knowledge, skills, and funding (Merry et al., 2023) but capacity-building at the local level, including training and developing local CPD providers, is crucial for ensuring sustainability (Miller et al., 2015). Such partnerships can facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and the development of contextually relevant CPD curricula (World Health Organization, 2021).

Enhancing Awareness and Engagement: According to Giri et al., (2012) engagement at the government level can secure the mobilization of resources, including financing, and provide support for setting standards. Additionally, the government may play a role in enforcement. However, the involvement and effectiveness of the government are often linked to the political stability of the country (Vakani et al., 2024). Efforts should be made to raise awareness about the importance of CPD among medical professionals and healthcare institutions. Incentives such as certification, career advancement opportunities, and recognition can motivate participation in CPD activities (Lockyer et al., 2004).

Utilizing Technology and E-Learning: The use of technology and e-learning platforms can overcome geographical and resource barriers, making CPD accessible to medical professionals in remote and underserved

areas. Online courses, webinars, and virtual simulations can provide flexible and cost-effective CPD opportunities (Masic et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The establishment of CPD programs is essential for enhancing the competence and performance of medical professionals in the SEA Region. Despite the challenges, strategic investments in infrastructure, policy development, and collaborative efforts can create a robust CPD system that ensures high-quality healthcare delivery. By prioritizing CPD, the SEA Region can address its unique health challenges, improve patient outcomes, and foster a culture of lifelong learning among medical professionals.

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