

School Health Services in the United Arab Emirates: Exploration of an Effective Way to Provide Primary Healthcare for Children and Young People

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Abstract

Consistent with international trends, health service authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have acknowledged the importance of refocusing healthcare services to reflect more responsive, primary, and preventive care approaches, especially in services for children and adolescents. The UAE has well-established school health services, which represent an ideal avenue to support this service delivery transformation. However, the opportunity to achieve this service transformation has not yet been fully realized. Current school health services in the UAE may need strengthening to better contribute to the changes needed to focus on prevention and health promotion. Studies that assessed components of these UAE school health services identified various gaps, such as human resources, capacity gaps within service providers, and the lack of a framework focused on prevention and promotion services. These gaps need to be addressed to ensure comprehensive and quality services are provided for the target group.

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Introduction

Most healthcare system service activity and expenditure in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) relates to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and asthma [1]. Adolescents and young people comprise a large proportion of the UAE population; almost 15% are under age 14 years and 27% are under 24 years [2]. NCDs are prevalent among adolescents and young people. Recent reports have highlighted high rates of overweight and obesity, asthma, diabetes, and mental health issues in this population [3-7]. Many NCDs are preventable lifestyle-related diseases and represent a major burden on the UAE healthcare system [1, 3, 8]. UAE health service authorities have acknowledged the importance of responsive primary preventive care, especially in services provided for children and adolescents. The Ministry of Health has also highlighted the need to improve the quality and

quantity of primary healthcare services [9]. This resonates with international calls to adopt primary care-focused proactive healthcare systems that provide comprehensive care and achieve high levels of health for individuals through promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services [10].

Adolescence presents a golden opportunity to address the increasing incidence of NCDs in the UAE, especially as positive health behaviors can be taught/reinforced and negative health behaviors addressed during this stage [11-15]. In addition, adolescents require appropriate support and assistance to successfully navigate the significant developmental changes they experience [14, 16]. Adolescents with long-term health conditions face additional issues, including illness-related challenges and serious health consequences from poor management, which are in turn associated with increased expenditure

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and healthcare system use [14, 15, 17, 18]. Therefore, it is essential to support appropriate health services targeted to this population.

The UAE has well-established school health services, which represent an ideal avenue for the required service delivery transformation. These school health services are delivered by school nurses and were established to meet the basic healthcare needs of students with health conditions, prevent illnesses, and promote healthy lifestyles among all students. Globally, the importance of the school nurse role is recognized by students, teachers, and healthcare organizations. School nursing services have been linked to improved student well-being and better academic outcomes, especially for students with health conditions [18-20]. School nurses are usually registered nurses, and preferably have a postgraduate qualification in a relevant specialty area (e.g., primary care nursing or family care nursing) and relevant clinical experience.

However, UAE school health services may need strengthening and restructuring to better contribute to the changes needed to focus on prevention and health promotion. Studies that assessed the capabilities of school-based healthcare professionals in the UAE found gaps in knowledge and competencies that may hinder their contributions to this transformation [21-23]. Recent studies found the majority of school nurses were expatriate, female, and held diploma-level qualifications, with few having postgraduate qualifications relevant to school, family, community, or primary care nursing practice [21, 24]. In addition, current service provision is focused on routine clinical and administrative functions, with administrative functions often being dominant. The clinical functions of school nurses are important and contribute to primary care services, such as medical screening, vaccinations, health education sessions, food safety auditing, medication management, and responding to immediate healthcare needs and emergencies among students. However, current healthcare services in schools may lack appropriate practice frameworks to focus these services around prevention and promotion and ensure comprehensive and quality services are provided. This is expected given that the UAE healthcare system was built around secondary and tertiary treatment approaches.

A recent study from the UAE suggested a salutogenic approach may support school healthcare services to focus on prevention and health promotion [25]. This approach represents an important tool for establishing adolescent-focused health promotion actions [26-29]. However, it may be necessary to translate the assumptions of this approach (or alternative approaches) into actual healthcare service elements [29]. It may also be necessary to explore the adopted approach in terms of the cultural, social, religious, and economic context of the UAE to ensure successful implementation.

Conclusions and recommendations

The school health service is an important platform for the provision of primary healthcare services for children and adolescents, especially those with long-term health conditions and complex healthcare needs. Evidence

indicates that childhood and adolescence are important developmental stages in which health promotive and illness preventive behaviors and attitudes can be established and sustained. Therefore, investment in these services offers a golden opportunity.

The UAE already has substantial infrastructure for school health services in place. However, more investment is needed to strengthen these services and achieve the desired outcomes. Human resources is one area that needs strengthening. School nursing is an advanced practice area, and practitioners are expected to have an advanced preparation to perform this role. Postgraduation certificates or substantial experience relevant to school health services should be a minimum requirement for healthcare workers in this important and specialized area of practice. Human resources in school health services should also be supported by continuous in-service education and professional development activities. This will ensure capacity building and up to date knowledge, especially in areas of relevance to the UAE community.

Service structure and processes need to be evaluated and examined, and preliminary work is needed to explore the current structure of school health services and their adequacy to achieve the stated purpose. In addition, there is a need to adopt appropriate primary care frameworks, guidelines, policies, and care pathways that can be implemented to provide comprehensive and quality healthcare services. This should be coupled with implementing interventions to build awareness of these service elements and processes among service providers. It is also necessary to evaluate the efficacy of these interventions. Finally, processes for continuous quality assessment and auditing need to be designed and implemented to ensure all elements of these services are functioning and achieving the desired outcomes for the healthcare system. Healthcare professionals' performance should also be periodically evaluated and appraised to ensure continuous competency and updated knowledge to practice in this specialty area.

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