

Headship for Full Length of Service in Medical Institutions: Prosperity for One, Uncertainty for Rest

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Medical institutions in India are comprised of discipline/specialty/subject wise departments rendering healthcare services to patients and imparting medical education concerned with the specialty. Every department has many faculty members and one of them happens to be the administrative boss of department designated as Head of Department (HoD). Interestingly, HoD does not require to have any higher qualification or experience to hold the post. Nonetheless, once a head, always a head i.e. he/she may remain head for ever like 20-25 years or so for full length of service.

Headship is a great responsibility and an opportunity to build a department so as to meet the need of quality education and research translating eventually to standard health care of society. A competent head with leadership ethics believes in collective growth of the department. However, skills in teamworking are not universal.¹ Overall situation of departmental leadership is disappointing at most of the government medical colleges in India.

Headship brings prosperity in multiple ways as HoDs' acts of commission are overrated and acts of omission are undermined. They are facilitated for the growth of department, even if their actual contributions were minimal. They hold rights to approve/reject research projects of co-faculty members and hence get plenty of honorary authorships in scientific publications. Headship bring official administrative experience, which makes them eligible for elevation to higher administrative posts in medical colleges.

On the other hand, uncertainty remains with rest of faculties, as their career remains largely influenced by level of agreement or disagreement with the HoD. In case of disagreement with head, faculty has to suffer ignorance, humiliation and defamation for their trivial mistakes. Faculties need to do more duties/difficult duties, have to include HoD in scientific projects, offer authorship and all. At the worst, more qualified and skilled faculties are harassed and suppressed by HoD due to professional rivalry. Such faculties work with low morale and their actual competency and visions are not translated into output growth of the department.

There is shortfall of a reasonable, suitable and acceptable solution however. Rotatory Headship may be one way out as being followed by few medical institutes like IMS, Banaras Hindu University (BHU) etc. Though the rotational headship was approved by the governing body of AIIMS, New Delhi in 2012 it could not get implemented till date.² PGI, Chandigarh has long been looking at AIIMS, New Delhi to take the initiative on the issue. JIPMER, Puducherry, and NIMHANS, Bangalore, had started this practice in 2013. On 10th September 2019, the authorities of Pt Bhagwat Dayal Sharma University of Health Sciences (UHS), Rohtak, have approved the implementation of rotatory headship in its medical and dental post graduates institutes.

Rotatory headship may help come out of compassion fatigue of long duration heads, may give opportunity to new ideas, new energy, new passion to contribute to the growth of department and patient care. It may also bring practice of professionalism and harmony amongst faculties. We need a balance of energy, enthusiasm and experience for headship. Ceiling the duration of headship to 5 years can be a reasonable way in order to give opportunity to all capable faculties. Kumar V D² pointed out that short duration of headship may fail to achieve long term goals. It sounds meaningful but not practical because Directors of medical institutions are changed every 3-5 years for better growth of the institute.

Responsibility of headship must translate into a balanced and collective leadership and definitely not into prosperity for self and uncertainty for rest of faculties. There must be some strong rules for conducts of HODs and there must be provision of actions for misuse of authority. Other faculties, who are equally qualified, must get an opportunity to flock their wings and take department to a new horizon. A rotational headship seems like a ray of hope. It will let the faculties think and dream for a better tomorrow. It may bring harmony and professionalism amongst faculties pushing aside departmental politics and differences.

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