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‘Maternal health the basics of public health’

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(L-R) Dr Malavika Subramanyam, Joshua Zahabian, Sanghamitra Savadatti, Carol Whittaker, Dr Debra Blog, Richard Kugblenu

health help US-based public health experts were in city to sign an MoU with IIT Gandhinagar

The basic building block of public health, whether in the United States or in Gujarat, is maternal and child health, said director, Center for Global Health, School of Public Health, Albany (New York), Carol Whittaker. According to a United Nations (UN) report published in 2012, every two minutes, a woman dies of pregnancy-related complications.

“Without healthy moms giving birth to healthy babies, who grow up to be healthy and productive adults, who then continue the same cycle of life, the population becomes less industrious. This hinders development of the economy as well,” she observed.

Whittaker along with a delegation from School of Public Health and the New York state health department officials was in city to announce the signing of an agreement between the school and Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar (IITGn). The tie-up will include exchange of students and faculty as well as collaborative research.

Visiting various hospitals, health centres and NGOs here, the team witnessed efforts to educate women from all sections of society on healthcare, which they believe bear great importance.

“The education material NGOs use in India to promote health among women and children would go a long way even in the US, where many avoid vaccination drives due to ill-informed notions,” said director, division of epidemiology, NY state health department, Dr Debra Blog.

Distinguishing between US and Indian health patterns, Whittaker said where the former’s population is afflicted with obesity, malnutrition is the problem here. Vector-borne and communicable diseases are down to a minimum in the US, which is not the case here.

Another difference, said Blog, was that the public health system is present down to the village level. “The services, albeit with basic resources and equipment, exist for all income groups in rural areas as well. In the US, however, only now are we implementing the Affordable Care Act – popular as Obamacare – to allow access to quality health for poorer sections,” she explained.

Explaining the field of social epidemiology, Whittaker said that it deals with ascertaining the social determinants of public health. “You can treat a disease. However, if you don’t identify the factors that can prevent it – good sanitation, clean and plentiful water, adequate housing among others – you are not going to have healthy citizens,” she said.

The two institutes’ tie-up came about with the efforts of IITGn assistant professor Dr Malavika Subramanyam and Sanghamitra Savadatta, who is a doctoral candidate at School of Public Health, Albany.

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