

## EDITORIAL

## BASIC MEDICAL SCIENCES: THE BACKBONE OF A MEDICAL COLLEGE

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Medical M.Phil (Pak) is a special degree totally different from M.Phil in general education. One very important difference is the time for completion of study. A medical doctor spends 24–25 years of education and compulsory service to get this degree, while M.Phil in general education subjects can be earned in 18 years only. The second important difference is in the course content of these degrees. To get admission to Medical M.Phil, prerequisite was 2–3 years' teaching experience as lecturer in the relevant basic medical science subject. At that time, the highest merit doctors selected by the Public Service Commission were posted as demonstrators in medical colleges. The Medical M.Phil, at Basic Medical Sciences Institute (BMSI), Karachi is a research degree with the same syllabus followed at Indiana University USA at that time. Medical M.Phil course included a compulsory Research Orientation Course. M.Phil degree holders have supervised FCPS trainees in their disciplines. Many M.Phil degree holders have been awarded Honorary FCPS. Medical M.Phil is not a lower level degree compared to FCPS. Instead of disregarding and disrespecting, the services of Medical M.Phil teachers must be recognised because they served and supported the medical education system of the country for many decades.

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A recent advertisement for Principal of Medical Colleges mentioned that 'only Level III qualification holders are eligible to apply' meaning that most of the basic medical sciences teachers, who are Medical M.Phil (Pak) degree holders, are not eligible for the post of Principal. This is alarming and creates a sense of insecurity and disgrace among M.Phil degree holder medical teachers. Basic Medical Sciences are the scientific basis for medical practice. Without knowledge of basic medical sciences, medical practice is mere quackery. Basic Medical Sciences are more than 50% of MBBS curriculum.

Further insult to the injury is that without any scientific calculation and foresight, Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) has restricted M Phil degree holders to become Professors after 2020. So they will never become Principal or Vice Chancellor of a medical institution in future. Unfortunately PMDC is considering only the duration of Medical M.Phil (Pak) course while completely ignoring the duration of years spent to earn this prestigious degree and its extensive and comprehensive course content. PMDC is also ignoring the universal fact that University degrees are considered higher than a Fellowship and basic medical science teachers are far more better researchers as compared with the Clinicians. Without research there is no progress in scientific knowledge. Unluckily, the universities awarding Medical M Phil are not coming forward to defend their granted degree.

This is very important to note that Medical M.Phil (Pak) is a special degree which is totally different from M.Phil in general education. One very important difference is the duration of years spent to earn this degree. A medical doctor spends 24 to 25 years of education and compulsory service to get this degree,

i.e., 12 years for F.Sc., 5 years in MBBS, one year in house job, two years of rural area service, 2–3 years of experience as demonstrator to get admission to M.Phil, and at least two years of M.Phil course. While M.Phil in general education subjects can be earned only in 18 years, i.e., 16 years to get Masters and two years for M.Phil. The second important difference is in the course content of these degrees. Medical M.Phil degree is a vertically and horizontally integrated programme in which 3 basic medical subjects are learnt and a research thesis with external examiners evaluation and full public defence is essential. The M.Phil in general education is not that much extensive and comprehensive.

Historically there was no post-graduate medical institute in basic medical sciences for M.Phil or PhD, during British regime in areas comprising Pakistan now. Anticipating the need of basic medical science teachers, the National Assembly of Pakistan, in August 1954, authorized the Basic Medical Sciences Institute (BMSI) to undertake meaningful research in clinical and basic medical sciences. The prime purpose of this institution, in addition to treating patients, became training and research in basic medical sciences. The Indiana University (USA) with its staff embarked on the establishment of BMSI. Dr. Paul A. Nicoll, Professor of Physiology headed this Institute.<sup>1</sup> The BMSI with six departments and laboratories, including Anatomy, Biochemistry, Microbiology, Pathology, Pharmacology and Physiology, was thus established as the most updated medical institution of its time for training of medical teachers. The first class of students was inducted on 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1959.<sup>2</sup>

The Medical M.Phil (Pak), at BMSI, Karachi, was a research degree with the same syllabus as was

being followed at Indiana University USA at that time. To get admission to Medical M.Phil (Pak), prerequisite was two to three years' teaching experience as demonstrator in the relevant basic medical science subject. At that time, the highest merit doctors selected by the Public Service Commission were posted as demonstrators in medical colleges. Important components of the Medical M.Phil (Pak) course were: i) Research Orientation Course consisting of Biostatistics (required for analysis of research results), Animal House (to teach animal keeping and handling for research), and Instrumentation (scientific background of functioning of research equipment). All these components were essential elements to complete any research project. Students who failed this three month's orientation course, were expelled from the M.Phil program; ii) Basic Medical Subject 'the Major' in which the M.Phil degree was awarded; iii) Two other basic medical subjects as 'Minor Subjects'; and iv) Research and Thesis in area of 'Major' Subject with public defence.

In the meantime, government provided scholarships to many doctors to get PhD from foreign countries. Only a few returned but because of lack of infrastructure, their expertise could not be utilized to produce more PhD teachers and Pakistan had to rely upon indigenous M.Phil teachers for the next four decades. For fifteen long years, BMSI remained the only institute that provided basic medical science teachers to Pakistani medical colleges. After that, on nearly the same pattern, the Post-Graduate Medical Institute (PGMI) Lahore was established in 1974.<sup>3</sup> BMSI Karachi and PGMI Lahore provided great teachers of basic medical sciences in the country for many decades. These M.Phil teachers served in Pakistani medical colleges and produced doctors of worldwide repute. Even now majority of basic medical science teachers are M.Phil degree holders and one cannot expect to replace these teachers with PhD teachers for at least a decade to come!

M.Phil teachers were already worried about PMDC decision of placing M.Phil degree at a lower level as compared with FCPS. By dint of their ability and hard work, M.Phil degree holders have supervised FCPS postgraduates in their disciplines. Many M.Phil degree holders were awarded Honorary FCPS in their disciplines. No *vice versa* example can be quoted. How then, Medical M.Phil is a lower level degree compared to FCPS? Throughout the academic world, research qualifications are considered superior as compared with fellowships. The research qualification adds prestige,

enhances clinical acumen and understanding and becomes a perfect combination for entering into medical academic career. The dissertation (as in FCPS) is also a good way in terms of research related report but lack the quality of solid research in view of its scope.<sup>4</sup>

Medical M.Phil was somewhat degraded when in 2005 University of Health Sciences (UHS) Lahore and other Universities started Medical M.Phil on the pattern of M.Phil in general education. They omitted the prerequisite of having two years' experience as demonstrator for admission. They admitted students on the basis of entry test only. They also omitted the Research Orientation Course for M.Phil. So the special nature and importance of Medical M.Phil (Pak) was lost and now after passing M.Phil one has to get two years' teaching experience as demonstrator to become eligible for the post of Assistant Professor while previously just after passing Medical M.Phil (Pak) one could directly be inducted as Assistant Professor. No doubt experience of teaching as demonstrator is just like postgraduate training as it is for clinical FCPS.

This is the need of the hour that instead of disregarding and disrespecting the M.Phil degree and M.Phil teachers, authorities should acknowledge the services of these teachers because they served the country during hard times and supported the medical education system of the country for many decades and possibly will continue to do so for another decade to come because medical universities are producing PhD scholars at a very slow pace. Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, Pakistan Medical & Dental Council and representatives of associations of basic medical science teachers should sit together to address different issues of categorization of degrees, problems of shortage of teachers in basic medical sciences and to allow M.Phil degree holders to be appointed as Principal and Vice Chancellor to restore the prestige and honour of basic medical science teachers in the country. Making rules without consulting the stakeholders only creates unrest and hue and cry which is not beneficial for anyone.

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