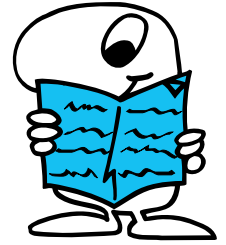


Initiative for Sub-District Support



Kwik-Skwiz
#24

An efficient secretary for a well-functioning district office

The Issue

Setting up the District Health System has seen a large emphasis placed on the establishment of district management teams (DMT) and on the provision of management training. However, just as in any company or business, managers require support and assistance. One aspect of this is secretarial support and assistance. If the District Management Team can be considered as the engine for the delivery of health care, secretarial and clerical support services are the oil that lubricates the engine.

This Kwik Skwiz describes the experience from an ISDS site where secretarial support to the DMT was identified as an important need. It then discusses the potential role of a person or persons in the District Office who can provide this support.

Case study from the NMTTS district, Northern Province

The problems

The need for the development and utilisation of secretarial services in the District Office (DO) came soon after the appointment of the District Manager (DM). The DM felt that she needed a person to act as her personal secretary. In the absence of a qualified, experienced secretary within the district, she selected a clerk from the stores of the district hospital. This was somebody with no formal secretarial training.

Soon after, the demands on the DM were such that the clerk who had been selected to work in the District Office was beginning to struggle. The person clearly lacked the experience to handle the various delegated responsibilities in an effective manner.

At the same time, the other members of the IDMT also needed secretarial and clerical support. They too began to pile on work for the clerk. As a result, the work of both the DM and the other members of the IDMT was not being done as effectively as it could have been, and the secretary was complaining that "they delegate work to me but not the time and resources to do it".

Apart from the lack of capacity of the clerk, there were other reasons why the secretarial needs of the district office were not being fulfilled.

- The actual job description of the secretary was not clear and the tasks submitted to him were not prioritised and co-ordinated so that different members of the team presented everything as urgent.
- The lack of co-ordination and planning in the District Office meant that no one was really sure of what the different members of the IDMT were busy with. Because there was no diary for the DMT as a whole, this led to missed appointments and team members not being easily located when needed. This also made it difficult to organise and share transport resources.
- The administrative and secretarial resources of the hospital were not being adequately used by the IDMT. For example, despite the fact that the hospital typing pool was always available, everybody in the District Office used the clerk for typing. Unfortunately, when the District Office clerk approached the hospital typing pool, he had to beg and plead for urgent tasks to be done first.
- A lack of adequate office equipment for the IDMT members caused them to be over-dependent on the secretarial support of the DM. For example, there was only one computer in the District Office to be shared by 5 people. Other resources like telephones, fax and photocopy machines were not easily accessible.

The Solutions

To address the various problems described above, the DM called a meeting to develop some guidelines for better co-ordination of work. It was understood that the District Office secretary was there to support the entire IDMT. To be effective the DO must run as a team, with the secretary helping act as a link between members, co-ordinate schedules and dispatch information. The NMTTS District Office introduced a weekly schedule monitoring system in the form of a simple office diary sheet illustrated below.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesd.	Thursday	Friday
Mrs. X					
Mr. Y					
Ms. Z					

Since then, a lot of improvement has been noticed in the co-ordination of movement and activities. This also encouraged a more collaborative managerial style with clear lines of responsibility and accountability for all members of the IDMT.

In-service training of the secretary by a professional trainer was organised, as well as a workshop on labour relations, public service code of conduct and relevant procedures. The hospital superintendent provided informal computer training.

Finally, some of the resource constraints were addressed. Two computers were made available for the IDMT and the Region augmented office equipment a few months later: a fax with direct line, a photocopy machine, and printers.

Lessons Learnt

While it is clear that DMTs require secretarial support, most districts will not be able to hire fully trained and experienced secretaries. It may be important for districts to identify somebody such as a clerk or administrative officer who has the potential to work as an effective District Office secretary.

Such a person must have the required skills and competence to be trusted with tasks and responsibilities of a District Office secretary.

Resources must be available for a District Office to be efficient. Basic, essential equipment should include:

- computer with printer
- telephone
- fax machine
- tape recorder
- lockable cabinet with files/filing system
- stationary

A clear understanding of the expectations of the managers and the limitations, strengths and problems of the secretary will inform the demands made on the secretary and the need for further capacity building to meet expectations.

Clarity in the job description for all the members of the IDMT, as well as the secretary is important.

Time must be made each week for the IDMT members and the secretary for feedback and for planning of the week ahead. This allows the secretary to manage the office diary more effectively.

Regions and provinces must consider developing an in-service training programme for Office Assistants, owing to their importance in the effective implementation of the District Health System.

Resources in the district should be shared to meet the needs of the district as a whole. In particular, the human and material resources located in district hospitals should be shared with the IDMT.

The key skills for an efficient secretary identified by the authors

The following skills are considered essential for an efficient secretary. Some require formal training, others can be taught hands-on informally.

1. Typing and basic computer literacy (Word processing)
2. Stationary, stock and asset control
3. Communication and telephone techniques: how to answer the telephone, how to switch and transfer calls, taking, storing and recording messages, etc.
4. Writing and note taking for minutes, official letters, memos, notices, etc.
5. How to schedule and co-ordinate activities in a diary.
6. Organising workshops, making travel arrangements, etc.
7. Filing and registry systems, petty cash and mail book control
8. Good inter-personal skills, including management of conflict, crisis and stress.

Essential body of knowledge

- Knowledge of the organisation/office, its structure, aims and priorities
- Knowledge of scope of work of the members of the IDMT
- Policies and procedures of the District Office and the public service in general
- Labour relation issues.

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