



The State Of Healthcare at IIIT

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Provision for health care in our college has always seemed to be sporadic, influenced by a seemingly vested interest but at the same time immune to any beneficiary change over the years. The holistic well being of the student community, encompassing both physical and mental health, is one of the highest priorities for any educational institute. Yet, health promotion and prevention are the most neglected part of both policy and practice.

College health-service programs tend to have three primary areas of responsibility: physical, mental, and educational. Medical services range from primary care in the form of treatment for colds, viruses, and minor injuries at less comprehensive centres to thorough lab tests, X rays, specialists, and pharmacies at the most comprehensive centres. Many college health programs also provide counselling services.

Provision for Physical Health Care

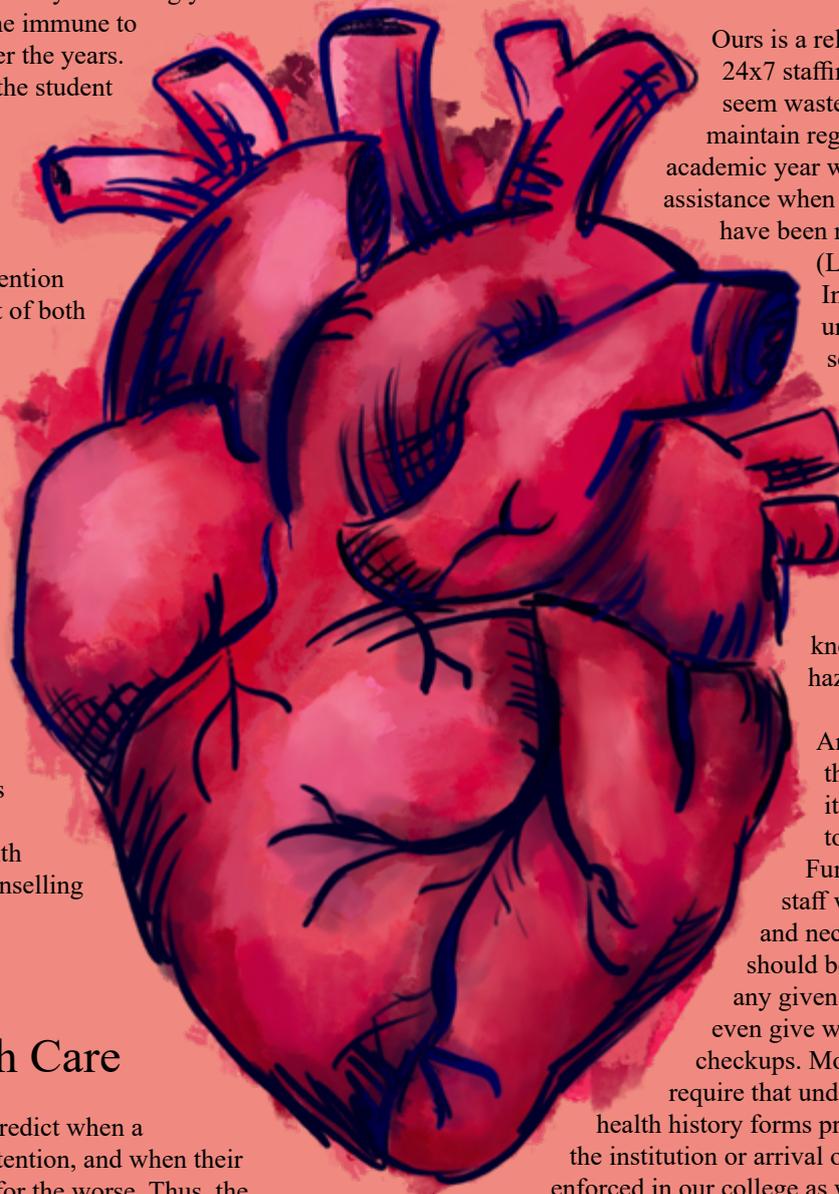
It is nearly impossible to predict when a person requires medical attention, and when their symptoms can take a turn for the worse. Thus, the recent increase amongst reports of incompetence and frequent absences of the staff employed at Aarogya cannot be ignored. Limited stock on essential first-aid supplies in a college which encourages (compulsory) participation in physical sports and other activities comes off as completely

nonsensical. Hostels are found to have next to zero first-aid necessities. All this has led to a widespread distrust towards the Institute's only medical service centre which must be dealt with and fixed immediately lest it leads to dangerous, unforeseen circumstances.

Ours is a relatively smaller college, and 24x7 staffing of the medical centre may seem wasteful to some. Similar colleges maintain regular weekly hours during the academic year with a system for emergency assistance when needed. However, incidents have been reported on public forums (Life@IIIT-H) where the Institute ambulance remained unavailable while a student had severe medical emergencies and in certain cases, even outright refused to do their job have been reported on the forums. Are most students even aware that these facilities exist within the campus? And won't this absence of knowledge lead to unnecessary hazards?

An optimal emergency system is the need of the hour. Moreover, it must be known and accessible to each and every student.

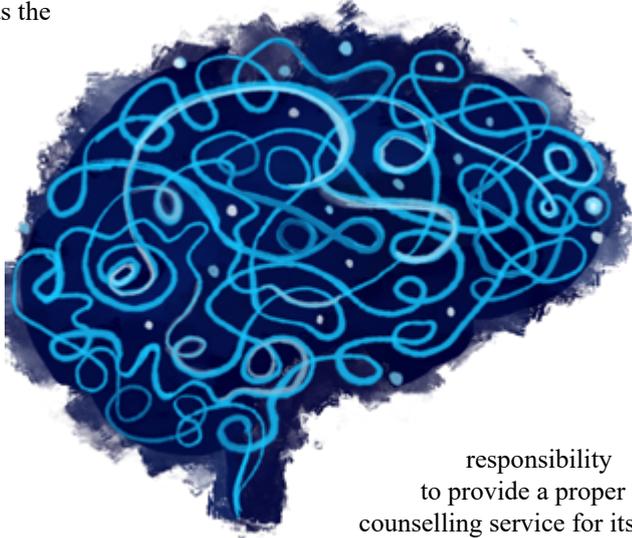
Furthermore, competent nursing staff who have access to reasonable and necessary primary care facilities should be employed and available at any given time. In the future, this can even give way to semester-wise medical checkups. Most colleges and universities require that undergraduate students fill in health history forms prior to their admission into the institution or arrival on campus. This needs to be enforced in our college as well. It aids the health centre staff to prepare for any special needs identified on the form and to have a recorded history in case certain information is needed to properly treat a particular student.



Provision for Mental Health Care

A healthy body is no good without a fit mind to control it. Mental health is just as crucial to the smooth functioning of a person as physical health. And just as regular physical checkups are a basic necessity for the body, counselling is a must for the mind.

Every college or institution has the



responsibility to provide a proper counselling service for its students or workers to seek support. Colleges like IITs have given huge importance

to this fact, and they offer a broad range of services including psychological assessment, individual therapy, group therapy, medication and management to promote mental health, life skills workshops, emotional resilience workshops and much more.

Every institute has one or more full-time psychologists and furthermore, they have regular visiting psychiatrists available for consultation. On top of that, the institutes have also taken efforts to reach out to the students who might need help, by forming committees among students to look out for signs of mental illness, and by doing so they can curb the stigma and create a more safe environment for students to open up about their struggles.

Meanwhile, at Aarogya, the facility isn't even open for the better part of the day, and the counsellors are irregular. They are only available for a short period of time, which is not nearly enough to attend to all the students on the campus. This makes it seem as if the facility is nonexistent.

While available, the facility is not even professional, they impose their own bias on the patients. There have been incidents where the students who tried to seek help, were instead shamed for being in relationships or other reasons. This kind of attitude discourages students from being open about their mental health.

College's Response

The college's response to the issue has been that we don't need better facilities inside the campus because our college is located in a city with good doctors available at close proximity. But that's simply not enough. Doctors outside the campus do not try to reach out and help the students open up, they charge a hefty fee and it's impractical to regularly spend hours going out to seek counselling services.

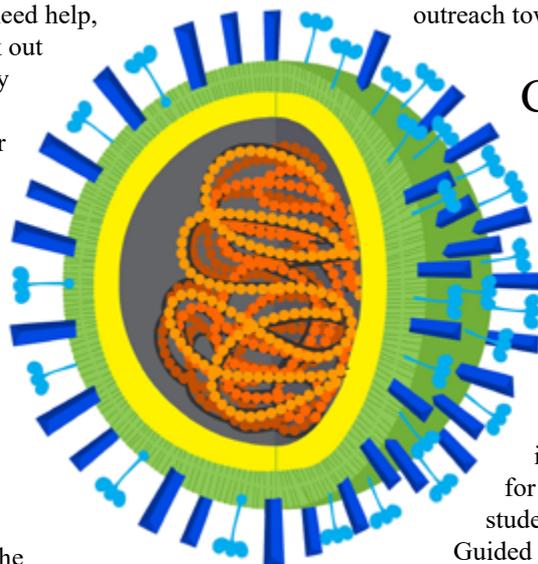
Other than that, the outside doctors are no good in the incident of a mental health emergency such as an emotional breakdown. Even the psychologists available in Aarogya are underqualified to handle such a situation properly.

However, this is not the case in most well-established institutions.

IIT Kanpur has recently taken the initiative to help students deal with familiar depressive symptoms such as stress, low mood, lethargy, etc. through different online exercises, questionnaires and games. The website is called TreadWill and is developed upon the extensive research conducted by Nitin Gupta, a professor at the Biological Sciences and Bioengineering department of the IIT.

Northwestern University (IL) developed an app for students, called "Breathe," to support healthy living and manage stress. It provides a variety of guided meditations and breathing practices to help deal with stress; reduce the negative impact on mind, body, and spirit; decrease perfectionism and self-criticism; and enhance confidence and well-being.

What can our institute do to help? It can start by making sure the counsellors are friendly and are increasingly more familiar towards the students. The timings for when they are available must be lengthened. It would be ideal if the psychologists hired were more experienced professionals. It is also crucial to sensitise the rest of the staff such as security guards and wardens of all hostels to further improve the outreach towards the students in need.



Conclusion

While the college and a few students have taken numerous efforts for this initiative, there is always scope for more. A student's overall success implies investing in a student's life broadly. Access to affordable healthcare should continue to be a priority for institutions of higher education for they remain a crucial factor in student development and growth.

Guided by a comprehensive framework and foundation for providing these services, universities can help a student burgeon emotionally as well as academically. ■