

Engaging Islamic religious scholars and leaders to increase acceptance of MITS procedure in a mortality surveillance program in rural Bangladesh

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Background

- The Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS) program is implementing postmortem minimally invasive tissue sampling (MITS) procedures to identify the aetiology of <5 child deaths in Baliakandi, a rural sub district of Bangladesh.
- The MITS procedure evokes socio-cultural, emotional and religious concerns that could influence acceptance.
- Islamic religious approval 'Fatwa' (interpretation on a point of Islamic *Shariah*) from respective authority to implement MITS was prerequisite
- Formative research explored that it is important to expand the religious permissibility of MITS among all levels of Islamic religious leaders. and community residents for greater acceptance of MITS implementation.

Objectives

- To establish endorsement of the MITS procedure from Islamic religious perspective at community level.
- To expand the social acceptance of MITS in light of religious permissibility among the predominant Muslim community residents.

Implementation process

Group discussions and meetings

- Two group discussions with:
 - Four (4) recognized Islamic religious scholars (*Muftis*) and
 - 21 Senior *Imams* (who lead congregational prayers)
- 84 group meetings at local Mosques including general community participants
- Circulated 246 copies of 'Fatwa' to:
 - All 84 Imams at Mosques where we arranged meeting
 - Presidents and secretaries of each Mosque Committee
 - Interested religious persons attended our meeting in Mosques
- We also explained the 'Fatwa' contents highlighting the major points related to MITS procedure to the general community members who came to perform religious prayer at Mosque.
- Our team noted and responded to the questions participants asked related to MITS and CHAMPS activities.

Content and discussion on 'Fatwa'

The 'Fatwa' focused on major issues related to MITS procedure:

- Tissue and blood sample collection is allowed only for research purposes; sample amount must be smallest/minimum
- Must ensure voluntary participation of parents and guardians of deceased children
- Any financial transaction is prohibited; should not hurt the deceased body (minimal invasion)
- Demonstrate respect to all deceased child by the team before, during and after MITS procedure
- Ensure no delay or difficulties in funeral activities and burial process for MITS procedure



Implementation area information

- 7 administrative unions; 261 villages with 2,27,000 residents
- Predominantly Muslim communities (82%)
- Agricultural livelihoods
- 311 Mosques; 12 Madrasas (Islamic academic institution)
- 227 Mandirs (Hindu Temples)

Year	No. of Meeting	Total participants attended
2017	3	160
2018	16	501
2019	45	1425
2020	20	634

Implementation period

From May 2017 to December 2020

Results

Agreement on 'Fatwa' and disseminating at local level

- All the participants attended the religious leaders meeting shown interest to discuss on to the content of the 'Fatwa'.
- Muftis* agreed to permissibility of MITS procedure following the 'Fatwa' and senior *Imams* concurred with them.
- Senior *Imams* suggested to continuously engaging with local level religious leaders and community residents to enhance acceptance of MITS procedure.

Religious leaders support to our program

- Two of the *Muftis* and 10 (ten) *Imams* actively supported explaining the permissibility of MITS procedure in respect to Islamic religious perspective to the deceased families when our team requested consent for MITS procedure.
- Religious leaders also supported to reduce 'misconceptions' about MITS procedure to the community people explaining the MITS permissibility in light of Islamic religious perspectives.

Influence of religious concerns on MITS procedure

- Of the 185 families (parents and guardians of deceased children) were requested for consent for MITS procedure, 37% (69/185) consented.
- Among the refusals of MITS procedure, only 9% (10 out of 116) reported religious beliefs as the reason, which declined over the time from 50% (3/6) in 2017 (inception of MITS procedure in September 2017) to 4.5% (1/22) in 2021.
- Religious scholars and leaders informed that 'seepage' after MITS is performed could negatively influence MITS acceptance.

Program learning

- Religious scholars are well respected to and followed by religious leaders and community in case of religious confusions or controversies.
- All senior Imams have strong connections and regular communications with religious scholars (*Muftis*) for religious discussion and decisions.
- Junior Imams lead congregational prayers at local Mosque are connected with senior Imams and religious scholars (*Muftis*) as well.
- An Imam leads the funeral prayer and present in the deceased household until burial is completed which is strongly linked with religious acceptance of MITS procedure.
- Local religious leaders can respond to clarify and resolve any religious concern related to MITS procedure raised in the community.

Conclusions

- Islamic religious scholars (*Muftis*) are the important stakeholders to endorse and extend religious permissibility of MITS procedure.
- Religious leaders are the key stakeholders to expand the religious acceptance of MITS in the community.
- Public health programs that include evaluations of deaths or needle biopsy must engage religious scholars and leaders throughout the study.

See more data at
champshealth.org

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