Ministry of Public Health  
Office of the Minister: Briefing note number 1  

Accountability briefing note¹

Summary
The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) leadership is determined to ensure there is good governance² in the MoPH. Anti-corruption³ for example, is one of the top priorities. Another issue that has been recognized as needing attention is that of accountability. This note briefly states what is meant by accountability as currently applied to the health sector here in Afghanistan. It then highlights the types of accountability relevant to the MoPH and the top priority areas where accountability mechanisms or processes need to be developed in the near future.

Key points
- Accountability matters. Without good oversight we cannot be sure that the government health services and public health interventions are of quality and are effectively and efficiently benefiting those they are intended for.
- There are many types of accountability, results and management accountability are just two examples – we, in the MoPH have to be answerable about the achievement, or not, of objectives, targets etc.
- There is also a culture of accountability. The MoPH, as an institution, is currently developing this so that it becomes a workplace where everyone behaves responsibly.
- Accountability also requires powerful stakeholders, those governing the state institution and those delivering health services, to answer for their actions to our target stakeholders, the governed, who use health services.
- As a top priority, central level MoPH will develop accountability processes throughout the state institution as part of having good governance. Eventually, there should be such processes at all levels of the health system and in all health facilities.

Context
Accountability is being addressed in the health sector within the wider context of good governance being a top priority of the Unity Government. Senior management in the government is determined that public officials and institutions are effective, that they are performing to their full potential, providing value for money in the provision of public services, contributing to effective state building, instilling confidence in the government among the general public and being responsive to community needs.

¹ This briefing note on accountability is the first in a series of such notes that will be developed over the next few months. The purpose is to help clarify to stakeholders the current thinking of the MoPH leadership about terms or words that are increasingly being used and that need to be turned into effective and effective practices. This is because it has become increasingly clear that different people have a different understanding of what a term or word means. This is resulting in confusion and could lead to lack of effective implementation of the issue.
² See the MoPH Statement on Good Governance, April 2015
³ See also the MoPH Statement on Addressing Corruption in the Health Sector, April 2015
As a state institution the MoPH is also addressing accountability as a priority issue not only within the framework of governance of the ministry but also of its new vision and mission. The following for example, is the current draft mission statement:\footnote{4}{The final draft will be in the new MoPH National Health Strategy 2016-2020}

The mission of the Ministry of Public Health of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is to make a significant impact on reducing mortality and improving health through better quality, coordinated care that is more accessible, and to prevent ill health through an increase in cost-effective public health interventions. The priority focus of work will be on women and neonatal children, on quality specialist tertiary care especially through public-private partnerships, controlling the quality of imported pharmaceuticals and of food, on the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases, and on merit based appointments. ‘How’ all this will be undertaken is within the framework of strong leadership, sustained political will and commitment, good governance especially anti-corruption and accountability and effective and efficient management.

\textbf{What is meant by accountability as applied to the health sector here in Afghanistan?}  

There is no one definition of accountability as it depends on the context to which it is being applied. A very concise definition is the obligation to explain and justify behaviour and actions. The most relevant definition for the MoPH has been taken from a World Bank note on accountability\footnote{5}{World Bank note by Rick Stapenhurst and Mitchell O’Brien} and adapted (the words in \textit{italics}) to the specific context of the ministry, especially with the contracting out mechanism in place. The definition is:

‘Accountability in the Ministry of Public Health ensures actions and decisions taken by public officials and those non-governmental organizations contracted through the contracting out mechanism are subject to oversight so as to guarantee that government initiatives meet their stated objectives and respond to the health and medical needs of individuals and communities, thereby contributing to better governance and poverty reduction.’ \textit{It also requires powerful stakeholders, those governing the state institution and those delivering health services, to answer for their actions to other stakeholders, the governed who use health services, and/or suffer some sanction if performance is judged to be below the required standard.}'

\textbf{What accountability is not}  

Accountability is often confused with and the word used when meaning something else such as transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, or integrity. It does come close to ‘responsiveness’ and ‘a sense of responsibility’ - a willingness to act in a transparent, fair, and equitable way – but again, should not be used in their place.

Drafting protocols, implementing quality control systems and benchmarks such as the balanced scorecard, and client satisfaction surveys are not a form of accountability, as a relationship with the governed, health service clients, is lacking. Such tools and activities offer the opportunity for the MoPH to gather information about its performance but in most cases to date there is no formal or informal obligation to account for the results to the public. Public reporting to the media also rarely qualifies as public accountability. The MoPH can make its reports, assessments, etc. publicly available. But a public debate about the information that is released will arise only if a journalist, an interest group, social media on the internet or other stimulates action to hold the ministry to account.

\footnote{4}{The final draft will be in the new MoPH National Health Strategy 2016-2020} \footnote{5}{World Bank note by Rick Stapenhurst and Mitchell O’Brien}
What types of accountability?
As a state institution that delivers public services in the health sector there are a number of different types of accountability relevant to the MoPH. These include:

- Political accountability – to the Unity Government
- Legal accountability – work within the boundaries of laws and regulations
- Administrative accountability – adhere to central government rules and procedures
- Professional accountability – highest standards of work
- Consumer/patient accountability – answerable to the users of health services about quality, access, cost, client/patient attitude, friendliness of health facilities etc.
- Institutional accountability – the MoPH as a state institution
- Collective accountability – The MoPH as the institution responsible for the health of the people of the country
- Hierarchical accountability – from the bottom up and from the top down in the structure of the MoPH
- Individual accountability – answerable for individual actions, meeting of outputs within set timeframe
- Results accountability – answerable about achievement of set objectives, targets, indicators etc. and their quality
- Management accountability – answerable about MoPH management culture, style, practices, oversight, outputs and outcomes etc.
- Financial accountability – answerable for the use of the MoPH budgets and other funds
- Procedural accountability – adherence to MoPH procedures

Last but not least, there is one more type of accountability, cultures of accountability. In any country there are diverse cultures and each will have its own way of holding others to account. Similarly, each ministry has or needs to develop its culture of accountability. The MoPH, as an institution, is currently developing this so that it becomes a workplace where everyone behaves responsibly. To foster this, the following are being addressed as a minimum:

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for every person, directorate, department and unit
- Individual, directorate, departmental, unit measures of success that are few in number and manageable
- Naming of names along the accountability chain/process
- When expectations/planned results are not met, consequences need to follow
- Merit based appointments – one criteria being knowing that the person will accept and be happy to work in a culture of accountability
- Making every opportunity to communicate to staff the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of reforms and other changes
- Peer mentoring
- Making the best use of information that is generated as a result of meetings, and through reviews, reports, MIS etc.
- Acknowledging excellent performance

What are the priority areas that currently need more transparent accountability?
- Within central level MoPH - by setting clearly defined roles and responsibilities for every person, directorate, department and unit, developing and using individual, directorate, departmental and unit measures of success that are few in number and manageable, naming people along the
accountability chain/process and having mechanisms to regularly e.g. on a quarterly basis, appraise progress, document the results, collate the information, determine trends and send the overall results to the Minister’s Office for discussion at Executive Board meetings.

- **Provincial level** - Once an accountability process is underway at the national level, develop a similar process in all provincial health offices.
- **Within health facilities** – each health facility at all levels of the health system needs to assess and ensure all is done as for central level MoPH. Overall results should be sent to the appropriate supervisory office e.g. at provincial level and below send to provincial health office.
- **Priority offices/departments/programmes/facilities** – Some offices and programmes need to ensure that their accountability process is in place and is transparent in the immediate future. Top priorities for immediate action are the: polio eradication programme, laws and regulations office, drug and food quality laboratory.

**How to evaluate?**
The MoPH Executive Board could develop a set of questions about accountability that it asks when receiving results on accountability. Each directorate and health facility should do the same before forwarding results to their relevant supervision office and then ultimately to the MoPH focal point for good governance.

**What sanctions?**
The possibility of sanctions makes the difference between non-committal provision of information and being held to account.

Sanctions internal to the MoPh are being decided. They may be a mix of informal such as having to verbally explain and justify any action or lack of before the Executive Board or some other group; and formal, for example imposing some form of disciplinary measure.