

## Will a wealthier India be a healthier India?

India, the second largest populated in the world, is one of the keen aspirants for the new super power with its prowess in defence, economy, development in various sectors such as R &D, education and other sectors.

*Coming to the health sector, where do we stand?*

Seriously I do not know where we stand. I'm baffled with heights of disparity in the health care being delivered to the two extremes of economic categories of the society.

There is a sad state of current rural neglect. The doctor patient ratio is also very low. An example for this sad state is the number of neurosurgeons working in India. 677 for 1000 million people. There is no leadership; no Government has ever been accountable for health care.

Even the politicians in India take pride in private hospitals encouraging medical tourism. Medicine has, of course, been taken to the market place these days and, consequently, market forces will have to act on the same. Making medicine a business could, in the long run, be counter productive.

Anything can be sold as a risk factor these days. Large hoardings in metropolitan cities proclaim that killer diseases like diabetes and hypertension are going to annihilate Indians in the near future. Soon our "stars" will be there to advertise these claims. This makes very good business for the private sector medical industry. Clinical research organizations are

another new addition to the burgeoning medical industry in India. These are the middlemen who get drug trials done in Indian hospitals for multinationals. "Informed" consent becomes very easy here, thanks to the gullible poor patients who still have faith in their doctors. Fee splitting is another menace that has crept in and would only increase as the competition gets stiffer.

Be that as it may, India needs clean drinking water for its masses, a smoke free home with a roof over their heads, three square meals a day uncontaminated with animal and or human excreta and toilets for every house to avoid the ravages of hookworms. This coupled with economic empowerment of village women and compulsory primary education for the female child should make India healthy and wealthy. Ill-equipped public hospitals, lack of emergency services, usage of unsterilised needles and lack of professionals in the public sector due to the poor salary and lack of will to provide service to the poor makes the state run medical missionaries miserable.

The reasons why doctors move to private-sectors/abroad are very well known to everyone. India ranks as one of the most corrupt nations in UNDP reports. It is not without reason. The state hospitals have continual political and bureaucratic interference. The state hospitals have become black holes for the little funds invested. Fund infusions without proper and effective utilization will do no good

to the State health care. I believe the private sector is utilizing Funds and investments in an efficient manner. No wonder 80% of outpatient attendances are in the private sector.

The poor do not go to private hospitals in any part of the world. They rely on the state run hospitals. And in order to provide good medical care in state hospitals, there needs to be adequate funding which can only be possible if the government has money to spend. We cannot expect private health sector to run on charity. And also to do charity, you need funds. If someone has invested money, he is looking for profit, whatever may be his declared intention. I think it is better to make the profit out of people who can afford to pay it rather than people who cannot afford.

Most of the problems in India including that of corruption is because of poverty, and the only way India can get rid of this curse is by earning more.

Instead of curbing Health Tourism to India, it would be preferable to ensure that Health Tourists contribute directly to help the many poor in India who do not always have access to "special" medical treatment. All Health Tourists could pay 10% of their hospital bills to a "Health Fund for the Poor".

As foreigners keep flying into India for treatment, they are bringing money to spend in India as well. This in the long term will boost India's economy, and once money keeps rolling in and India's economy

flourishes, the living condition of the general population will improve.

Foreigners who are coming to India for treatment are coming here for their own benefit. It saves them money and saves them time. They do not want to go bankrupt by going private in their own country and they do not want to wait on a public sector waiting list until a time they will never need the treatment anymore.

I think instead of discouraging these hospitals from acquiring foreigner patients, I think we should encourage the Indian Government to make the most out of it and use the revenue so generated in providing better medical care to the poor through its public health sector.

In the mid-1980s, India used to spend \$40 million a year sending heart patients outside. But today, we have overseas patient's coming to India for their treatment. It's a great reversal and it happened because of our excellent doctors and private sector funding. I will illustrate a case example of one single private hospital in India 'Escort Heart Institute'. It is now one of the largest heart institutes in the world. It caters to over 4,000 surgeries, 10,000 angiographies and 3,000 angioplasties every year. Not only that, it has one of the best outcomes: 0.8 per cent mortality and 0.3 per cent infection rate, which is better than anywhere else in the world.

I don't think beggars are choosers. When the government spends so little on health, it is better that brilliant doctors move to private sector or

abroad rather than lose their skills in Indian state sector hospitals. 30 years ago during the socialist/communist regimes these views would have found ideological support but they wouldn't have done any good. No amount of charity/rhetoric can substitute sound policies. I believe that private sector in health should be encouraged with simultaneous investments and reform in government sector. Both are equally important and should be complimentary. India still has one of the highest Infant mortalities and lots of deaths to communicable diseases. We don't need tertiary hospitals and super specialist for treating the common ailments. A health worker costing fraction of a doctor can do the same job. The Increasing role of private sector in Tertiary care can help release precious funds for primary health care, cancer screening programmes, immunization, fighting malnutrition and providing safe portable drinking water.

Development in different fields should proceed simultaneously and this fact should be borne in mind in the healthcare industry as well. Foreign exchange earned by medical tourism will certainly boost our economy which will in turn raise the standard of health care systems. What is needed is a systematic approach to make sure that a part of the funds earned is channeled to primary health care.

To be very frank the current state (of Population explosion, malpractices, unemployment and poverty) in which India is can only be amended if every-

one realizes their self importance and try to contribute rather than cribbing on Private sectors if they are contributing in some way. Yes I definitely agree that the Government should start a more structured health care system and spend more on basic needs of human i.e. health care and education rather than sectors like defence which we hardly need. The proper channelization of economy is definitely going to be of help to mass, so lets stop passing remarks on private sector and rather urge the government to inculcate the good things from private health care.

We (Indians) have a symbiotic relationship with the world, no one is selfish, private hospitals in India are providing a good healthcare equivalent to developed nations, and this is why they are attracting global patients. So let's encourage them (Private Hospitals) and urge the government to improve the Public healthcare system simultaneously by promoting Health Education and taking out a bigger fraction of its GDP for health.

To summarize let's be a part and parcel of the new emerging health care of India by some contribution rather than awaiting for help distantly. Private hospitals are definitely a silver lining for developing India. It's up to us and our policies to tap their resources.

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