Healthy India: paradigm shift in policy to achieve universal health care

Satish Shukla

Globalization of economy has brought about faster growth rate and has led to high-end and new kind of consumerism in all the countries. This palpable change in the society can be felt more in developing countries such as India. The health sector in India is experiencing a similar transformation, where people on the positive side of the economic divide prefer corporate hospitals to government medical college hospitals and primary health centres. However, a large section of the population who lives in small towns and villages, and on the other side of the economic divide still trust and even get their basic medical facilities from the government-operated health centres, many a times with great health perils. Even though some dynamic young doctors have opened up hospitals at peripheral places away from city and towns – more due to market demand – a lot more needs to be done to provide basic medical facilities to the common Indian.

What can be done and who is responsible for providing better health care to people? Constitutionally, it is the state's responsibility. But the scenario is fast changing. The private sector is pitching in and partnering with the government to share some of the responsibilities. This has benefited many sectors of the economy.

In Education, from primary schools to universities and technical education, private institutions are coming up every where and changing the quality of education disseminated to our children and youth. The growth is phenomenal and by using government channel, the private sector is able to take education to the unreached places. Even better, government – private cooperation with controlled, disciplined approach,

to increase awareness, will augment the country for a brighter future as education is the single mode and tool to all our prosperity in every field: population control, maternal and infant mortality, child labour or women abuses.

The same holds good in medical education. Government medical colleges used to be the centre of excellence in medical teaching and health care dissemination. Now in most of the states, government medical colleges and their hospitals are in a dilapidated condition and even some are identified by the Medical Council of India (MCI) for derecognition. The predicament is such that even the Chief Minister of an Indian state showed ignorance and surprise when the State's oldest and prestigious medical college was served the notice of derecognition. Who is to be blamed? We cannot always blame the government or politicians. As an alumni from one of these medical institutions, have we ever cared to look back positively and not lament and feel sorry for this decline in the quality of medical education and health care service. If each college's – few are more than 100 years old and majority over 50 years – alumni, who are employed in, or own private/corporate hospitals worldwide vow to participate in their college revival by constructively partnering with the government, a futuristic and efficient medical care and medical education delivery platform can be established in each state of India. The government-owned health centers and hospitals can then continue to serve the common Indian for his/her basic health care needs.

It needs change in the political vision of the government of recognizing the deficiencies in the healthcare delivery system and formulate plans where the alumni can partner in the revival of the medical education system. Indian doctors, who are serving in the best of the hospitals or own corporate hospitals, are aluminous of one such Institution in India. In fact the alumni/alumnae community is looking forward to pay back to their alma mater so that the newer generation gets better medical education, which is comparable to the western countries or to developed countries. Most of the doctors in India are influential, treating politicians and hold good relation with the people who take decisions. Not only the alumnus, but all the medical organizations including the Association of Surgeons of India (ASI), should come forward to form a single platform/consortia and promote the

S. Shukla
Editor / Chairman, Indian Journal of Surgery,
Retd. Prof. and Head of Surgery,
M.G.M Medical College and M.Y. and Associated Hospital,
Indore

Lakshmi Memorial Hospital & Research Centre,
Indore - 452 001
India
E-mail: drsumit_shukla2003@yahoo.co.in

idea government-private partnership in medical education and in primary health care in all states of India. It may need a change in the basic policy, but eventually continuous positive efforts will open new frontiers of cooperation. Medical education and general health and medical care in the country, can develop manifold in cooperation with government, doctors including Non-resident Indian (NRI), medical associations, social groups, and public in general.

Medical disciple associations like the ASI, are academic bodies, propagating medical education by organising conferences workshops, seminar etc. Most of the associations do discuss the welfare of its members, participate in meeting of various committees formed by the central and state government on medical education and various health related programmes, but the results are never tangible. In most of the cases individual brilliance are visible, however the associations' initiatives are never highlighted. All surgical associations should come forward in collaboration with its state units and financial institutions to help its member in setting up hospitals at distant places associating local people. Association should monitor such hospitals, guide them in its function and train the local doctors as needed. Social and human obligation should be one of the objectives of the association. The concept is there, but needs more comprehensive deliberations in right direction to strengthen medical care, and be a part of new progressive India. In many countries including USA and UK, the medical associations influence their National Health Policies and guide in every medical-related actions of government including medical education, monitoring of hospital care, foreign medical graduates, training and national health programmes. Before

it is late, the medical associations, comprising of leading surgeons and physician, should take active part in basic policy making of the government along with the elected members, and help in systematic development of hospitals and other medical facilities, as required.

Beside academics, surgeons and physicians of our country also have a definite role to play. In a globalized world we have to change according to the need of the time. Medical tourism is fast coming up in India because of highly trained doctors and outstanding but affordable medical facilities now available in some parts of India. Not only the metropolitan cities, but the tier two and three cities are showing signs of progress in all fields including medical care, which was not visualized 10 years back. With recent emphasis on infrastructure development, the medical care is going to reach the small towns and villages. This is the time to come forward play your role positively to strengthen the total health and medical care system of the nation. The initiative can start by sharing the best practices through the association's publication and arranging live workshops, which can prepare our colleagues to face the challenges of delivering world class medical and health care in a globalized world.

Other developed sectors of our economy – Industries, IT, Defence or Aerospace – also have gone through similar transition. Health care sector can follow their success stories. We cannot acclaim India a developed nation till we achieve the goal of universal and quality healthcare. The basic indicator for any developed nation should be a healthy child smiling in their mother's lap. This is no imagination but a vision, which to become reality needs constructive cooperation between all the stakeholders associated with health care.