

SNAGS IN PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS

THE AMERICAN humourist Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, once remarked : *Everybody talks of weather, but nobody does it*. This is equally true in the case of health also. Everybody says : *Health is wealth*. But how many of us are seriously conscious and committed to this wealth ? Someway or other, health is a serious issue, irrespective of nations – developing or developed, disease profile and their quantum may vary. Also, there are snags in combating the problems everywhere. In this context, let us dwell on the Indian scenario.

The common experience in this country is that those who can afford fund and facilities they run for expensive nongovernmental medical centres. Their percentage is meagre. The rest of the people, about 80 percent, mostly living in rural and semirural areas, economically downtrodden, are to depend mostly on government hospitals and health centres. Everybody, including the public representatives (who make thousands of promises for people's welfare during election) know how horribly deplorable their situations are. There are buildings, mostly cracked or demolished due to improper care, beds for patients remain unused or overused, facilities for pathological tests are not properly maintained. Many hospitals in their custody have sophisticated X-ray machines. CAT scanners, MRI, facilities for scanning, EEG, ecocardiography, etc. etc. It is reported, in many cases these costly machines are kept idle or inoperative due to lack of technicians and poor management. This is an area where streamlining is urgently needed to make their uses meaningful and appreciable. For this a good number of medical technicians need to be created by proper training and education.

According to veteran doctors, practicing medicine over a period of three decades in rural areas and slums, most of the patients they face, suffer from gastrointestinal diseases amoebiasis, malaria, mumps, common cold,

anaemia, night blindness, hypertension, tuberculosis. Meagre and irregular supply of drugs create problem to treat these patients. Arsenic contaminated water also is creating hazards to public health in some of the rural areas. There are water borne diseases which can be avoided if pure drinking water is available. Also, if detected in time, these diseases can be cured by inexpensive medicines. Unfortunately, many rural health centres, even hospitals in towns and cities, do not provide these medicines. The reason is bad management. In this regard, the current nation wide drive to prevent polio is a glaring example. It has proved how a massive well concerted drive with a wide spectrum of workers – doctors, paramedics, NGO-activists and *panchayet* workers could bring about a great success in arresting polio in the country. Such approach can be organised in the case of diseases mentioned above. For example, Vitamin-A pills can be distributed to school students by teachers to prevent prevalence of blindness. Similarly, through teachers, panchayet workers and NGO-activists water disinfectant pills may also be distributed to obtain edible water.

True, there are taboos regarding certain diseases due to ignorance. Tuberculosis and leprosy are the classical examples. Once societies considered these diseases as 'God's curse'. But now their notion has been changed. They know these diseases are curable. This has been possible due to concerted drive by mass education and providing of proper health workers. For AIDS, such a drive is needed.

However, some of the serious community health hazards are overlooked or underlooked, or just ignored in many cases. For example, think of the uranium mine at Jadugoda in Jharkhand. Inhabitants of that locality are regularly exposed to radioactivity resulting to radioactive illness. Similarly, people living in the vicinities of various chemical industries, face hazards due to chemical pollutants. In these cases programme is badly needed for

regular monitoring and medical aids for public awareness. Public awareness can help people to understand crisis well in advance and medical facilities can be rendered before it is too late. The present writer once visited a nuclear power plant of British Electricity Generating Board at Anglesey in Wales. The plant has ten 500 MeW units. He noticed that the plant maintains regular public awareness service. Experts of the plant meet school and college students, and also local people. Tell them about plants operations, effects of radioactive hazards on health, their early symptoms, and in that case what they themselves should do as early aids and finally where to go for medical supports. Such programme is needed at large in this country, too, for various industrial health hazards for early measures.

Also, psychological and psycho-somatic problems need immediate attention. Earlier, they were limited within narrow sections of the societies. But now they are spreading vulnerably all over the nation. Causative factors are manifold : rapid socioeconomic growth, so called modern life-style, aberrations of human values in most of the societies, deprivation, drug addiction, political turmoils, etc. etc. etc. Many mental patients are treated mostly in private clinics on which there is no public control. Many of such clinics are amateurly run by inadequately trained doctors with poor logistics. In fact, mental patients are

poorly handled in the country. Time has come when we should build up adequate mental health-centres all over the country with duly qualified and trained doctors and workers as is done in the conventional clinics and hospitals in organised way.

Thousands of medicines, vitamin capsules, food-supplements and devices for physical toning are marketed under different trade names. Strong motivation by drug companies through journals, dailies, radio and TV makes people allured. How many of these medicines are really essential and harmless and how many are nonessential, rather cumulatively deterrent to health ? This is a big question. Answer to this should reach the people to avoid hazards. Such responsibility can be expected from the Medical Council and the Indian Medical Association.

It is encouraging that the focal theme of the Indian Science Congress : 2005 to be held at Ahmedabad during January 3 to 8, 2005 is "**Health Technology as Fulcrum of Development for the Nation**". It is expected Scientists participating in deliberations in it will give their views and suggestions for standardizing and streamlining medical services in the country so as to shape health as the fulcrum for development. □

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The manufacture of drugs and their easy availability at reasonable prices are vital. The development of all industries and the prices of their products, particularly those of the drug industry, are, however, markedly affected by the patent laws in force in the country..

[S. S. Sokhey, Science and Culture, January, 1962]

The contribution of MEDICINE to civilization aided by the other sciences in great. A healthy body means a healthy mind, and such minds are less likely to cause internal or external strife. There is no doubt that a large part of the greatly increased comfort and safety that we enjoy to-day is the result of the phenomenal advances that have been made in the medical sciences in recent times. I would say with Howard Haggard 'And finally the physician'. He rightly holds that 'Medical history discloses the forces that have made our modern civilization possible.....

[U. N. Brahmachari, General President, Indian Science Congress, 1936]