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Promise of 50 drugs free for all

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Sept. 16: The Centre plans to provide about 50 medicines free to all Indian citizens, whenever required, from birth to death, a senior health ministry official said today.

The Union health ministry is also working to expand the range of diagnostic and treatment services offered free through government health clinics and tertiary-level hospitals, said Ranjit Roy Chaudhury, an adviser to health minister Harsh Vardhan.

"We hope these two mechanisms will help reduce personal out-of-pocket expenses people currently pay for health care," Chaudhury said, speaking at a meeting organised by the Public Health Foundation of India to discuss strategies to introduce universal health care.

Several studies in the past have indicated that nearly 70 per cent of all health spending in India comes from personal household expenses. Health economists have estimated that such expenses push over 30 million people into poverty in the country each year.

The cost of drugs makes up a significant component of health spending. While medicines to treat malaria, tuberculosis and anaemia, among other conditions, are available under the existing public health programmes, the health ministry wants to expand this list.

"All people in India will be able to get 50 medicines free of cost from birth to death," Chaudhury said. "A slew of diagnostic services and treatment in primary, secondary, and tertiary-level hospitals will also be available to poor and vulnerable populations," he added.

He declined for the moment to specify the health conditions to be covered by the 50 medicines, but experts not associated with the plan said most of these were likely to be drawn from a set of essential medicines used in primary care.

The list would then include common anti-infective drugs such as antibiotics, anti-amoebic, and anti-fungal drugs, anti-allergic, fever-relieving, and pain-relieving medications, anti-anaemic formulations, and drugs for a select set of chronic conditions.

Health ministry sources said the list of medicines being drawn up would cover common illnesses, a mix of infectious and chronic conditions.

Shaktivel Selvaraj, a senior health economist with the Public Health Foundation of India, said Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Rajasthan were already providing over 200 medicines free through their government clinics. "If this is rolled out, we would expect more states to expand the range of free medications — but the challenge will be in ensuring smooth procurement and distribution and access in all primary health care centres," Selvaraj said.

An expert panel called the High Level Expert Group, set up by the UPA government, had three years ago submitted a report calling for universal health care that would use government tax revenues.

Health economists at the Public Health Foundation of India have calculated that India would need to spend about Rs 1,600 per capita per year to provide diagnosis and treatment for 80 health conditions for 70 per cent of the population.

Their study, presented at the meeting today, has also indicated that a per capita expenditure of Rs 1,200 would be sufficient to cover 25 priority health conditions that would account for 70 per cent of illnesses, assuming 70 per cent of the population makes use of these services.

India's current per capita spending on health care is about Rs 500, Nachiket Mor, an economist, a former member of the expert group and now member of the Reserve Bank of India board.

"Any universal health care programme needs to be very strong in both prevention and early treatment," Mor told **The Telegraph**.

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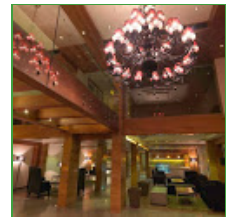
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