Centre must aid Bihar better healthcare: Dr K Srinath Reddy

By Banjot Kaur Bhatia, TNN | Dec 18, 2012, 01.22 AM IST

Public Health Foundation of India president Dr K Srinath Reddy’s High Level Expert Group on universal health coverage, constituted by the Planning Commission of India, has submitted its report which also refers to healthcare scenario in Bihar. Banjot Kaur Bhatia caught up with the Padma awardee in Delhi. Excerpts:

HLEG’s report has estimated Bihar would have the second lowest per capita public spending on health in the country by 2020. Don’t you think this will adversely affect the ongoing health programmes and that the Centre should step in?

Yes, this will impact the healthcare in the state in long terms. We, therefore, recommend that the Centre should preferentially allocate more health funds to Bihar. Of late, the health indicators in Bihar have somewhat improved. But to catch up with the national average, the Centre must step in. Any health policy made at the central level must look into safeguarding the interests of states like Bihar and UP.

What’s your assessment of the existing health infrastructure in Bihar?

Bihar’s problem is the failure of its primary healthcare, mainly due to lack of manpower. Our study found many sub-centres of health functioning sans ANMs though two are a must. If multipurpose healthcare providers are made available at district hospitals, people from far-flung areas need not come to Patna for treatment of even minor diseases.

Do you think mushrooming private healthcare units will be of help?

Private healthcare providers mostly focus on tertiary healthcare which is often expensive. Everything, therefore, can’t be left to them. In the existing scenario, however, they can be contracted with to provide services at the district hospitals in order to achieve universal health coverage. But no one should be allowed to mint money.

State Health Society-Bihar recently signed an MoU with a telemedicine firm. What do you think about this and other such IT-enabled projects?

Telemedicine or any other IT-enabled service can deliver only if there are the front line workers at the village and district levels. Infotech can be an enabler, not a substitute. Before investing in it, the investment has to be made in trained and motivated health resources.

Newspapers recently reported non-availability of drugs at district hospitals as well as a medical college in Patna...

Mean availability of the essential drugs in Bihar on the survey day was 43% as against 88% in Tamil Nadu. As for drug ‘stock-outs’, Bihar’s health facilities registered an average of 42% as against 17% of Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu buys drugs in bulk at prices far cheaper than market prices. Bihar can also adopt the TN model with local variations.

Your report says there must be 27 medical colleges in Bihar for universal health coverage, but there are currently only eight. There is also shortage of doctors...

Nothing can compensate for non-availability of medical colleges. If the state is not funding medical colleges, the Centre must do it. Private sector is not going to construct medical colleges in rural areas. The problem of shortage of doctors can be tackled innovatively. Let, for instance, 50% of the medical seats be reserved for ‘local’ candidates and let the state fund their education with the rider that they on completion of their education would serve the ‘local’ hospital for, say, five years. After five years, a fresh batch of medical students would pass out to succeed them.

Kala-azar and Japanese Encephalitis are annual menace in Bihar...

Yes. Health package for Bihar must be framed keeping in mind these diseases. Multi-sectoral interventions on sanitation and drinking water fronts are also required to tackle this.

Bihar recently got its AIIMS. How do you think it would contribute to state’s health services?

Bihar’s health needs are vast. JPNAIIMS will only address the tertiary healthcare, for which people need not rush to Delhi every time. But if you don’t focus on primary and secondary care, all the health issues would not be addressed.

Your report talks about establishing a framework of universal healthcare coverage. But how a financially constrained state like Bihar will implement it?

This is to be negotiated. On December 27, the 12th Plan document has to be debated in the National Development Council. I hope Bihar CM Nitish Kumar, known as a champion of social causes, would press the Centre to agree to spend more on health to ensure universal health coverage.

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