NAC forms panel for health plan roll-out

Health ministry, Plan panel officials presented their views to the NAC on recommendations of high-level group

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New Delhi: The Sonia Gandhi led-National Advisory Council (NAC) on Friday formed a working group on universal health coverage for phasing-in the roll-out of the proposed scheme in the 12th Five-Year Plan period.

Meanwhile, differences persist between the health ministry and the Planning Commission on the role of insurance and the private sector within the universal health coverage (UHC) plan.

Health ministry and Planning Commission officials presented their views to the NAC on the recommendations of high-level expert group (HLEG) appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. At the heart of the debate is the expansion of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), an idea that members of the expert group had rejected. It was of the view that the insurance scheme should be integrated within UHC.

“The point is to ensure continuum of medical care. The HLEG had expressed concern regarding expansion of RSBY as insurance alone will absorb a significant part of the health budget. Our suggestion was that 70% of health budget be spent on strengthening primary health centres,” said Mirai Chatterjee, an HLEG and NAC member.

Besides RSBY, the health ministry had objected to the Planning Commission’s proposal to introduce a “managed healthcare approach” fearing further privatization of the health sector. Introduction of a single national health mission (NHM) instead of separate urban and rural missions has also been a bone of contention between the health ministry and the Planning Commission.

“Various proposals were discussed in the meeting. The council is for providing health equity and reduction of inter and intra-state variations on health indicators,” said Union health secretary P.K. Pradhan, who made a
presentation before the council.

The Planning Commission has rewritten the health chapter after being criticized by the health ministry and civil society representatives for deviating from the government’s primary goal of providing health coverage to all. Under the previous version of the health plan, the Planning Commission had introduced radical suggestions limiting the government’s primary responsibility only to provide essential health interventions such as immunization, ante-natal care and disease-control programmes, leaving clinical services to the managed-care model. Effectively, the government’s role would have diminished from providing health services to managing the network.

The NAC also discussed recommendations of its working groups, including those on the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA, and pre-legislative consultative processes. The final recommendations on PESA by the council are likely to be made next month. The next meeting of the NAC is scheduled on 18 September.

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