Dawn of a national health mission?

The announcement of the National Urban Health Mission (NUHM) is the only novel feature in the budget so far as the health sector is concerned. However, since no specific fund allocation for this was indicated, it is surmised that the marginal increase in the allocation for the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) would serve to initiate the NUHM. As the President announced in her address to Parliament last week, these two missions are in any case intended to soon merge to form a National Health Mission (NHM).

What then of universal health coverage (UHC), which featured prominently in the Prime Minister’s speech at the polio event a few weeks ago? This does not figure in the finance minister’s budget speech, possibly because the shape and scope of UHC will be defined in the 12th Five-Year Plan, which is still in the final stages of its development. Only after the Planning Commission and the National Development Council review it and the Central as well as state governments agree on its framework is the UHC likely to receive a financial allocation. We will have to wait for the next budget. In the meanwhile, we can draw cheer from the increased funding for the social determinants of health, such as rural drinking water, sanitation, nutrition and environment, for they will help to protect and promote health and reduce the need for health care. We also draw hope from the emphasis on multi-sectoral coordination for improving maternal and child health, though how this will be accomplished better than the current NRHM platform is unclear.

For primary healthcare to be strengthened, in both rural and urban areas, we need a rapid expansion of the workforce. The budget does not provide for this. Tax exemption for health check-ups may be appreciated by the middle class and the private hospitals that provide such services, but there is little scientific evidence that such screening confers substantial health benefits. Strengthening of routine health services, especially primary healthcare, is the best way of assuring that health is protected, assessed and cared for by the health system in a predictable and efficient manner. Similarly, the growth of All India Institute of Medical Sciences-like institutions (ALIs) across the country will improve tertiary care in some areas but the greater need is to strengthen the capacity of all district hospitals to deliver
secondary care and essential elements of tertiary care everywhere. While ALIs have become a favoured project, district hospitals do not feature in the budget.

There is an increase in the tax on the upmarket cigarette segment but beedis and oral tobacco products as well as cheaper cigarettes get off lightly. Both the World Health Organization and the World Bank recommend raising taxes as the most effective measure of tobacco control. This will be especially helpful in reducing tobacco consumption among the poor, young persons and women whose lower levels of disposable income make them more sensitive to an increase in price.

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