

## COMMENT

# Vanishing Public Health-Care

With food prices sky-rocketing wage-earners in the low income group find it increasingly difficult to adjust their diet. They are consuming less calories these days, no doubt. They are spending more and more on food, leaving little to meet other expenses. After food, they are being forced to pay high prices even for life-saving drugs, thanks to privatisation of health service. The systematic dismantling of public health-care system has created a situation in which even middle income groups are running from pillar to post to manage direct formal costs, informal costs and indirect costs of treatment.

A single bout of illness can cost a rural household upto 78 times its monthly income, found a recent study. The study is reportedly based on household surveys carried out in five rural locations in Maharashtra, Bihar and Tamil Nadu involving 3,531 households, 18,323 people and 4,316 illness episodes among resource-poor families in 2005.

Interestingly, the rich pay less for medicare. The report is self-revealing. Households with income upto Rs 5000 a year spent 308 percent of monthly per capita income or more on an illness episode whereas those with annual income above Rs 15000, the wealthiest, spent 31 percent of monthly per capita income or more for a comparable event.

But the 10 percent with the lowest income, had to pay 780 percent of their monthly per capita income for a single illness, found the study published in Indian Journal of Medical Research.

The situation is no better in other states. When it comes to providing healthcare to the impoverished urban and rural poor the left-ruled West Bengal shows a pathetic scenario. One reason the left fared badly in the recent panchayet elections is the appalling state of health services.

In its report the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) noted with concern that though urban population in Bengal increased by about four lakh between 2002 and 2006, the number of beds in urban hospitals had actually decreased.

Also, the CAG is shocked to state that despite specific instructions from time to time, medicines worth 72.22 crore were not tested in the state drug control and research laboratory. Yet they were administered to patients by 25 hospitals between 2002 and 2005. During 2002-2006, 28,499 units of blood costing Rs 1.32 crore were destroyed because of improper planning for their collection.

Fund meant for the poorest remained unutilised. The result : critical patients from below poverty line families did not get the benefit under the state illness Assistance Fund, otherwise sanctioned exclusively for them.

Ill health-care coupled with high treatment costs is the norm of the day. And they are out to destroy whatever remains of public medicare delivery system because NRIs are coming in a big way to invest in health and education as well. Their business demands a crippling public health-care service and political parties, left and right alike, are working overtime to fulfil the demand of big business in health-care area. □□□