Road to universal health coverage

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Universal health coverage (UHC) aims to achieve long-term health for all goals for citizens in the country. However, the UHC is not a quick process and can be achieved in the coming years with adequate planning and support from all stakeholders. Universal healthcare and its progress about achieving health for all is in a state where the minimum quality standards are met with. India has to battle simultaneously both communicable and non-communicable diseases. The aim should be to continue progress towards achieving both Millennium Development Goals and also arrest increase in diseases like cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular etc.

It is promising that the Government, through recently announced the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017, which sets out to achieve quality and affordable healthcare services to all but has also committed to spend more on public health, especially, for primary healthcare, which would help bridge demand-supply gap in rural areas. The NHP’s main thrust is on UHC and affordable healthcare services for all without compromising on quality standards. Following focus areas of NHP 2017 should contribute towards ensuring:

Universal, easily accessible, affordable primary healthcare, digital interventions for the nation’s health; preventive and promotive focus with prudential choice, better regulatory mechanisms and quality control; fostering patient-focused, quality and assurance-based approach.

It is encouraging to note the focus on public-private collaboration. Since the private sector plays a major role in Indian healthcare. Public Private Partnership could be a critical enabler to ensure healthcare coverage across the length and breadth of the country for all and citizens of the nation. India’s population is evolving and ageing with the geri-atric age group expected to constitute 11 per cent share by 2025. Increasing urbanization has led to an explosion of the non-communi- cable diseases and India now carries a dual burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases. According to a white paper, Amegh Bharat: India Healthcare Roadmap for 2025, non communicable dis- eases are likely to dwarf India’s $6.2 trillion healthcare sector. India’s unique needs drive priorities for healthcare services and technologies. India faces a severe shortage of human resources and talent with rural-urban imbalances and variations in healthcare delivery. The strong bias towards curative care reflects a culture in which prevention and wellness receive only limited emphasis. In rural areas, the need for primary care and public health have long been inadequate.

Against higher public health budget, the health infrastructure, the Government needs to promote universal access to essential healthcare for all with the provision being led by the private sector, and the Government shifting more towards a payer and regulator role with pro- vision support focused on rural areas which are underserved.

This is a long-term objective but the urgent need is to create a roadmap for implementation, establish checkpoints and assign responsibilities among stakeholders. Also, its position on anything existing public and social insurance schemes need to be clarified as India is moving towards universal health coverage. Regulation ambiguity may significantly impede the ability to achieve some of the aspirations of the healthcare sector. The Government needs to take the lead in clarifying healthcare regulations for contracts among public and private play- ers; for the management of health technology assessments; for price controls on essential healthcare services and prices.

The healthcare sector needs significant funding. It is a fact that the Government alone cannot meet the challenges. The Public Private Partnership is probably one of the best solutions. The Government can take care of primary and community health centers. Reforms and provision of health insurance schemes need to be expanded, focusing on the UHC. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh have had several successful experiences which can be replicated from them. The Maharashtra Government has outsourced diagnostic, screening and other services. The State’s health department is opening up 31 multidisciplinary imaging (CT) scan centres in several districts of the State on Public Private Partnership basis. For higher spending in healthcare sector, Public Private Partnership can be scaled up and implemented across the country and the Government needs to encourage such partnerships.

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