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Assam Govt., Tata Trusts operationalise Cancer Care Foundation

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Government of India designed awareness, screening, early detection, and palliative care programmes will be implemented through the Assam Cancer Care Foundation.



The Government of Assam and the Tata Trusts has set forth on their joint initiative of establishing a comprehensive cancer care network in the state, with Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal, the Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Amit Shah, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Health Minister of Assam, and Mr. Ratan N. Tata, Chairman of the Tata Trusts, together unveiling the foundation stones of 19 modern cancer care facilities that will dot the state. The Government of Assam and the Trusts have set up the Assam Cancer Care Foundation, dedicated to this initiative.

Of these 19 facilities, 12 will be comprehensive cancer care centres on the premises of Government Medical Colleges in the state. Located at Barpeta, Dhubri, Diphu, Jorhat, Karimganj, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Nalbari, Silchar, Tezpur, and Tinsukia they will offer diagnosis and treatment of cancer cases. Another five will be adjacent to District Hospitals. Located at Darrang, Goalpara, Golaghat, Haflong, and Sivasagar, they will offer diagnostic and day care services, including chemotherapy. Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh, will be upgraded to an apex cancer centre with education and public health research capabilities. The State Cancer Institute (SCI) in Guwahati will be expanded to a 500-bed South Asia Research Centre.

This network will become operational beginning April 2019. It is designed to ensure that no patient has to travel more than a few hours for accessing full suite of cancer treatment within the public system so that care is affordable. The facilities have been designed to maximise patient comfort as they have to spend prolonged periods in the hospital. The facilities will be equipped with appropriate technology and task shifting tools so that the network virtually becomes one.

The Digital Nerve Centre (DiNC) set up at SCI and will enable this virtual unification across the State. It will help guide patients from the community to the apex level so that appropriate referral mechanisms and appointment systems are followed. It will also provide tele-health and virtual tumour board services at all network facilities so that any apex facility nationally can be consulted easily. This will eventually lead to an enhanced patient experience by ensuring that patients and caregivers do not spend time at hospitals because of lack of information regarding the treatment process. Mr. Tata and Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma inaugurated the DiNC yesterday.

Government of India designed awareness, screening, early detection, and palliative care programmes will be implemented through the Assam Cancer Care Foundation. This will be critical in ensuring that patients come forward for treatment at the first sign of symptoms. It is envisaged that after the network becomes operational and the programmes are fully implemented the shift from late stage to early stage detection will be evident within a three-year period. Dr. Sarma announced at the unveiling ceremony that cancer will be made a notifiable disease starting September 2018 in the State so that all patients are able to access care through the public healthcare network on the backbone of the DiNC. Once cancer is made a notifiable disease all practitioners will have to report any cancer case detected to the Health & Family Welfare Department of the State by filling basic information regarding the patient online.

Speaking on the occasion, **Mr. Sarbanada Sonowal** said, “The aim of this great initiative jointly undertaken by the Government of Assam in association with the Tata Trusts is to provide cancer care to marginalised sections of society and bring them some hope. I am very glad that the Tata Trusts have fulfilled their commitment by implementing this initiative as promised. I offer my sincere gratitude to Mr. Ratan Tata on behalf of the people of Assam for his great and philanthropist initiative for the state and the entire North - Eastern region. This initiative will benefit the people across this region, especially those who are marginalised.”

Mr. Ratan N. Tata said, “Cancer care in India is hindered by the lack of facilities, late diagnosis, and high cost of treatment. The Tata Trusts have resolved to tackle this by supporting the establishment of infrastructure across the country for high quality affordable care, and nation-wide screening and early detection programmes. Together with partners if we can achieve this, India will be able to dramatically increase survival rates, as in the developed countries. I am happy that we are able to join hands with the Government of Assam to achieve this transformation in the state and the region.”

The Government of Assam has made healthcare a top priority and has launched several initiatives in universalising cancer care, such as the establishment of the State Cancer Institute in Guwahati, provision of free diagnostics at District Hospitals, and the introduction of the Atal Amrit Abhiyan scheme which covers a large range of oncology services and almost 90% of the State's population. The network of Government Medical Colleges has also been expanding rapidly in the last few years. The proposed infrastructure will therefore be a platform to utilise these schemes.

The Trusts are currently in conversation with various other State Governments, like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Telangana, for establishing similar networks. Over the next three years, about 100 such centres are expected to be added.