

Dearth of doctors: Still a Major Concern in India

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In India, first of July is observed as Doctor's Day. It is celebrated to emphasize the value that doctors hold in our lives and this day is meant to pay them respect for their selfless service. However, No one can deny the fact that over the last couple of years, doctors in India are feeling unsafe and threatened. A threat perception; a feeling of insecurity has been constantly looming over the already-burdened minds of medicos in our country. Once called 'living gods on earth', they are now frequently bearing tags such as 'Dr. Death' and 'Dacoit Doctor'.

The episodes of assaults on doctors and threats have become so prevalent that doctors have united against this threat. Recently, an attack on junior doctors in West Bengal became the seed for a successful nationwide strike by all doctors with a notice of just two days. Some patient attendants in NRS Medical College Hospital attacked junior doctors after which, medics staged a strike. This strike got support from across the country, including the Indian Medical Association (IMA), which declared an All India Protest.

Speaking about the episode, Dr. Kapil Kochhar, Additional Director, Department of Bariatric, Minimal access & General Surgery, Fortis Hospital, Noida said, "According to data released by the health ministry in June last year, there is only one government allopathic doctor per 11,082 population, one government hospital bed per 1,844 population and one state-run hospital for every 55,591 population. The situation is so dire in the country that a 2017 study in the medical journal BMJ, the average time that primary care physicians spend with patients in India at an abysmal 2 minutes which is mainly due to the excessive burden on doctors. The data clearly reflects that India has a dearth of doctors."

India is not just struggling with paucity of doctors, but our doctors work under challenging situations as well - poor or limited infrastructure, high in flow of patient, no holidays and no personal lives. Despite this, facing ire of the masses without sufficient reason can be overwhelming. If the trust between doctors and patients wanes, our country's healthcare system will stand to crumble.

Speaking about the situation, Vivek Srivastava, CEO, HCAH, "Doctors are the pillars of the Indian healthcare industry and traditionally been regarded highly by society. Unfortunately, in India, owing to multiple factors like shortage of skilled medical manpower, limited infrastructure, demographical and geographical challenges, doctors operate in a challenging environment.

This situation is worsened by the lack of trust between doctors and patients which has become evident from the recent attacks and assaults on doctors. Home-based healthcare services is one such model which has the potential to efficiently solve a number of current challenges faced by the India's healthcare sector. Home-based healthcare relieves the growing burden on doctors by shifting the load off hospitals to a patient's home without compromising on quality of care, allowing doctors to treat a greater number of patients. This is a win - win situation for both the patients and doctor community."

Rajesh Ranjan Singh, COO, WISH said, "Doctors in this country are threatened and feel increasingly unsafe. A recent survey revealed that over 60% of them admitted they were unable to treat patients without fear of violence. The situation is even worse for doctors working in public hospitals, which are overburdened beyond their capacity. Even though doctors in government hospitals are extremely skilled, they are also overworked because they handle patients far beyond their capacity. Lack of adequate infrastructure and shortage of medical support staff such as nurses further augments the problem. This National Doctors' Day comes at a time when doctors across the country are agitating and demanding better security. We need comprehensive policy measures to address the challenges in our healthcare system. Increasing number of seats for MBBS as well as Medical Post Graduation is an urgent need. Not only do we need more doctors, we also need more hospitals across the country, especially in rural areas. The government should take the help of private players to help build/upgrade medical infrastructure at the primary centers so that people are not turned away because of lack of facilities. It should also open more medical colleges, incentivize doctors to work in public healthcare centers while ensuring they have a safe working environment."

Savitha Kuttan, CEO & Co – Founder of Omnicuris said, "Doctors are considered as one of the most trusted professionals in many countries including developed nations. There are published studies that show if you trust your doctor, you are actually more likely to do better. "Trust" on your physician is an important part of the treatment regimen apart from medicines and procedures. However, in India the recent incidences of violence against doctors is a sign that we have started to ignore this important piece of treatment regimen. This is a threat not just to the doctor community but to society at large which can even impair our national healthcare goals."

Dr. Vimal Verma, General Physician, Gramin Healthcare believes that, "A doctor's life is all about learning everyday. The challenges are also a part of our learning process. Providing primary and preventive healthcare in rural areas is all about trouble-shooting the problems first. As a doctor, we first have to educate our masses mostly females that they should visit us if they face any health problems. Providing understanding about maintaining proper hygiene and sanitation also come across as one of the major challenges in providing basic healthcare services. Then comes building the trust, which is the most difficult one."

Speaking the recent violence against doctors Dr Dharminder Nagar, MD, Paras Healthcare said, "This National Doctor's Day comes at a time when there is a lot of turmoil and unrest among the medical fraternity in India. On the one hand, shortage of doctors in the country has meant that available physicians are overburdened and stressed. On the other hand, the issue of violence against doctors has further raised concerns on their safety. The episode in Kolkata was not a one off case. Attacks on doctors are a regular feature in our country. A study conducted by the Indian Medical Association a few years back found that a whopping 75% of surveyed doctors had suffered some form of physical violence while on official duty. The healthcare structure in the country is bedeviled by problems of poor doctor-patient ratio, shortage of resources and inadequate infrastructure. Unfortunately, as the face of the healthcare system, doctors end up facing most of the blame. A prominent TV anchor was recently seen entering an ICU in a Muzaffarpur hospital, heckling the on-duty doctor and almost blaming him for the lack of adequate infrastructure in the hospital. The doctors in public hospitals are themselves stressed and overworked, sometimes working for days without adequate rest, conducting back-to-back surgeries and attending to hundreds of patients in a day. We need concerted efforts on multiple levels -- increase the number of doctors and specialists, incentivizing private hospitals to start centres in smaller towns to improve accessibility and improving the state of primary healthcare in the country. The media must also act more sensitively and display maturity and understanding of the healthcare scene in the country."

There is an immediate need to bring transparency among the society by highlighting the scarcity of doctors in India, showcasing the conditions in which Indian doctors work and most importantly by emphasizing on the need to express gratitude and empathy towards the doctors.