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â??To truly transform cancer care in India, we need to focus on public private partnerships"

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After the Centre announced the removal of customs duty on three cancer drugs in July 2024, the GST Council has now significantly reduced the Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate on those cancer drugs from 12 per cent to 5 per cent, marking a crucial step in making life-saving treatments more affordable for patients battling cancer. With a 12.8 per cent increase projected for 2025 in annual cancer cases , there is an urgent need to build a robust ecosystem to fight the inflating cancer load. To gain more insights on how the industry is planning to improve cancer treatments in India, BioSpectrum spoke to Pratima Reddy, Country Speaker for Merck India & MD, Merck Specialties.



What is Merck Healthcare's ‘Vision 2025’ for India?

Merck Healthcare's 2025 vision for the Indian market centres on expanding access, growing our cardiometabolic segment, accelerating the introduction of innovative therapies, and shaping the fertility market. Our focus remains on oncology, neurology, and immunology, while also driving growth in cardiometabolic care. We're committed to deepening and broadening our reach, ensuring more people benefit from our treatments. In fields like neurology, where unmet needs are significant, we are advancing our innovative portfolio with effective go-to-market strategies.

As global leaders in IVF, we're actively shaping the market through awareness, access initiatives, and policy advocacy, including supporting our women employees with IVF benefits. Despite India's population, the declining fertility rate is a concern we aim to address.

What are your views on improving cancer treatment in India, in line with the government’s recent announcement of exemption of three additional cancer drugs from customs duties?

The government’s decision is a commendable step towards making advanced treatments more accessible and affordable for patients in India. This initiative aligns with the country's growing focus on improving cancer care, especially as the disease burden continues to rise. However, there are still significant challenges, including late diagnosis, limited access to specialised treatment centres, and disparities in care across urban and rural areas.

To truly transform cancer care, we need to focus on strengthening healthcare infrastructure, increasing early screening and diagnostic programmes, and improving training for healthcare professionals. Public-private partnerships can also play a key role in expanding access to innovative therapies and ensuring that treatment reaches underserved populations. The disease burden in India demands a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach, and while these recent measures are a strong start, there is much more that can be done to alleviate the impact of cancer on patients and society.

As per the recent notification by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), breakthrough drugs might be launched in India without local clinical trials. How does Merck plan to leverage this development?

The CDSCO’s decision to waive local clinical trials for breakthrough drugs is a significant step forward, allowing Indian patients to have faster access to advanced therapies. We welcome this move, as it aligns with our commitment to accelerating access to innovative treatments. This development enables us to prioritise India as a key market for launching breakthrough therapies, ensuring faster availability of our high-quality medications to a broader patient population. We are actively exploring opportunities to leverage this regulatory change and expect to introduce more advanced treatments in India in the near future.

Speaking of improvement in cancer diagnostics, what initiatives are being taken by Merck in this space, especially with the advent of newer technologies?

Merck's oncology division is focused on addressing critical unmet medical needs, including in India, by advancing innovation in cancer diagnostics and treatments. We are prioritising cutting-edge technologies like targeted therapies, precision medicine, and immuno-oncology to not only extend survival but also enhance the quality of life for cancer patients.

In India, we've been delivering precision-led treatments for several cancers, including head and neck, colorectal, bladder, renal, and lung cancers. A key breakthrough is our immuno-oncology therapy, avelumab, which harnesses the immune system to fight cancer, offering new hope for patients with metastatic bladder, renal, and Merkel cell carcinoma.

Are there new partnerships with academias/ industry in the pipeline to strengthen healthcare delivery?

Aligning with the government's vision of universal healthcare, we pioneered the National Payers Partnership programme on cancer care. This groundbreaking initiative collaborates with national payers like the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and the Ministry of Railways to facilitate access pathways for cancer therapies.

We also work closely with state governments and other stakeholders to implement innovative and sustainable solutions for addressing access needs tailored to specific populations and regional diversity and dynamics.

To advance personalised medicine in oncology, Merck has partnered with prominent academic institutions and organisations. Recently, under our Umeed programme, we collaborated with the Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute and Research Centre (RGCIRC) and the Kalyan Singh State Cancer Institute in Lucknow. This initiative aims to improve treatment accessibility and raise awareness for patients affected by head and neck and colorectal cancers. Rooted in a multifaceted approach, the Umeed Program seeks to empower patients, foster awareness, and serve as a knowledge partner to healthcare professionals.

Currently, we are also in discussions with the National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPER), Mohali, to explore further collaborations.

Are there any major investment plans in the healthcare space on the horizon in India for the coming year?

At Merck Healthcare, we are deeply committed to strengthening our foothold in India by expanding our reach and impact across key therapeutic areas. A critical component of this strategy is investing in new talent and enhancing the capabilities of our teams. By bringing in highly skilled professionals and fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation, we aim to ensure that our teams are equipped to meet the growing healthcare demands in India. These new hires will play a pivotal role in driving our mission to provide innovative treatments, improving patient outcomes, and expanding access to high-quality care across the country.

We are also focused on building advanced capabilities through strategic training programmes and digital initiatives. By investing in the professional growth of our workforce, we are enhancing their ability to deliver cutting-edge healthcare solutions while staying aligned with the evolving healthcare landscape. This holistic approach, combining new talent, upskilling, and technology, will not only strengthen our market position but also ensure that we can continue to positively impact the lives of patients across India.

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