

India's vaccine shame

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Every second child born anywhere in the world gets the first shot of essential vaccine made in India. But every fifth child born within India last year did not get any vaccine at all. This is the story of contrasts regarding vaccines, the most cost effective preventive measure developed by humans to ward off deadly diseases in the last 100 years.

On July 8, Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad rattled off vaccination figures under the universal National Immunization Program which mandates providing every one of the nearly 21 million children born in the country every year with some life-saver vaccines.

According to government figures, only 81 per cent or just 15.7 million children born in 2008-09 got their measles vaccine, 83 percent got polio and the crucial DPT vaccine was given only to 78 percent of newborn children. The BCG vaccination figure was better at 94 percent but in the previous year it was near 100 percent. Another shocking revelation is that only 74 percent of expectant mothers got their tetanus vaccine shot.

It is safe to assume that the 5 to 10 million children left out of the vaccination loop are from the most vulnerable sections of our society. So would have been the case with pregnant women, unable to get the tetanus shot which guards against the life-threatening infection.

In 2006 and 2007, most of these vaccinations had reached more than 90 percent of the women and children who need it the most. The reason cited for the sloppy vaccinations

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figures is the “shortage” of these essential vaccines due to the closure of three major public sector manufacturers since January 2008 over quality issues. The combined “shortage” of these vaccines is estimated to be 100 million doses. The top three private manufacturers—Serum Institute, Panacea Biotech and Bharat Biotech—who supply more than half their production to the whole world have more than three times the spare capacity to make available the essential vaccines for the children if the government wants it.

In fact, the government procurement is stalled over price negotiations and the request from private companies for a sustainable price. The government bought two of these vaccines for Rs 65 crore in 2008-09, including some from the defunct public sector units.

What is surprising is that the Manmohan Singh government which swears by the “aam aadmi”(common people) will harm the health of the nation’s future citizens over a few crore Rupees. More shocking is the fact that the same government is willing to even consider a Rs 15,000 crore bailout package for the floundering “national” airline which has actually become a “notional” airline due to mismanagement and allowing more than two-thirds of Indians flying abroad to depend on foreign carriers. The annual travel and security expense of the Union Cabinet which has nearly 80 ministers is more than the money required to vaccinate all the newborn babies in the country every year.

The vaccination percentage of even some of our poor neighboring countries is more than that of our nation whose policy makers leave no stone unturned to reach a “global super power” status. Certainly, a “super power” cannot be built on the foundations of an “unhealthy nation” in the making.

The nation cannot find the funds to buy the essential vaccines for its youngest citizens. At the same time, the global community has placed its faith in the ability of some of India’s top vaccine manufacturers to develop a vaccine against the H1N1 influenza (swine flu) raging all over the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) has termed swine flu “unstoppable” in late July and expects even bigger surge in infections from the currently 175,000 patients when the winter sets in over the Northern Hemisphere. The pandemic vaccine against the H1N1 virus will be the key weapon in the fight against it. Indian companies are confident of developing the vaccine by September. Australia’s CSL, among the 26 companies working on it, has already started the world’s first human trials of a swine flu vaccine. The vaccine made in India will reach needy people around the world. But the Indian government has yet to indicate whether it will order a stockpile for her citizens. When will the nation learn from its past mistakes on the vaccine front?

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