Letter to Editor

PRIVATE PLAYERS IN MEDICAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Sir,

As per Medical Council of India (MCI), the country needs around 800 medical colleges by 2015 to meet the huge shortage of doctors and increase the doctor population ratio from the present 1:2000 to 1:1000.[1] At present we have 381 medical colleges offering around 50,000 undergraduate MBBS seats. [2] During independence in 1947, India had 23 medical colleges out of which only one was in the private sector. More number of private players started entering the sector in 1980s and 1990s. By 1998, we had 167 medical colleges; 113 in government sector and the rest 54 in private sector. [2] In the last 15 years (1999-2013), there has been a steep increase in the number of new medical colleges mostly by the private players. During this last 15 years (1999-2013), 214 new medical colleges were opened; 151 by private bodies and only 63 by government. At present (end of 2013), we have a total of 381 medical colleges with majority (205), by private trust and 176 run by government. [2]

Medical colleges by private trusts have some shortcomings. (3) Firstly, there is a big disparity between the place of need and the location of these new colleges. If we look at the trend of new medical colleges in the last 15 years, out of 151 that have been established by the private trusts, a majority (99) have come up in affluent states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Maharashtra. [2] Even within these states, these new colleges have been built in and around major cities, neglecting the far flung and not so developed regions. If we look at Tamilnadu, out of the 19 medical colleges which were established by the private trusts in the last 15 years, fifteen are situated in or near big cities like Chennai, Madurai, Coimbatore, Kancheepuram and Tiruchirappalli. Government can address this issue either by encouraging private parties to build new colleges in backward areas by means of incentives like free land and other facilities or by establishing medical colleges in these regions by itself. A case in point is Tamilnadu(a state in south India), where in the last 15 years government has also established 10 new medical colleges, mostly in backward and far flung areas like Theni, Thoothukudi, Dharmapuri, Tiruvanamalai and Villupuram.[2] Public sector undertakings (PSUs) can be encouraged to open new medical colleges in their region of operation. For example in Odisha (a state in east India), public sector undertakings like NTPC (National Thermal Power Corporation), NALCO (National Aluminium Company) and MCL (Mahanadi Coal Fields) have agreed to establish new colleges in backward districts of Sundargarh, Koraputand Talcher respectively.[3] There should also be a plan to build new medical colleges in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and in some union territories as they do not have any medical college. Health experts believes that an investment of Rs.150 crores, which is needed to establish a medical college in an area, can also stimulate socio-economic changes in form of development of roads, housing, shopping complexes, etc in that region. [4]

Secondly, the fees at most of these private medical colleges are too high for general candidates to pursue a course. Sometimes the fees are 5-10 times higher than the fees in the government medical colleges. So these colleges are looked upon as colleges for the elite. Government can think of some form of fee control or subsidy system to regulate this.

Finally, about quality of education imparted at these colleges. The quality in these colleges varies from very good in some to not so good in others. Government medical colleges can set an example to these colleges by maintaining highest standards of quality education. Some of these new private colleges can be mentored by established government medical colleges.

In this context the recent decision of the government to open new medical colleges by upgrading the district hospitals at 58 places is a welcome step.[5] So while medical colleges in private sector should be encouraged, it should complement the government efforts and not replace it.

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