

Policy perspectives for healthcare reforms

The thought leadership article by Darshan Shankar is an excellent policy road map for health sector reforms needed urgently in India which would require strong political will, in the interests of the people, to overrun the blocks created by commercial vested interests and apathy of the health bureaucracy.^[1] The paper reflects a comprehensive analysis of the health sector in India which continues to exhibit colonial mindset in medical education and prejudiced biases in favor of allopathic system.

Jawaharlal Nehru who propagated and established modern science institutes, including giving free hand to atomic energy program, at a convocation address at Pune University in May 1961, while advocating science, remarked that “Physics was Physics, there was nothing like Russian Physics or American Physics.” However, this is not true of medicine, which obviously is not a natural science, as is made out by western bio-medicine. As there are plural cultures across humanity, so are plural health cultures and medical systems. India has an advantage of plural systems, historically evolved and geographically the variant, which has sustained an integrative Indian culture. Unity in diversity is the key phrase for India, that is, Bharat.

How can traditions be nonscience or anti-science? How can people’s health practices and indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants, human biology metallurgy, architecture, mathematics, and astronomy be nonrational, nonscience? Modern medical sciences have not been able to unravel the transmission process of leprosy. There are several unanswered issues about HIV and AIDS and cancer, etc. How lady doctors from all systems of medicine in India follow traditional maternity practices and child rearing customs and traditions when they become mothers themselves? People would not have developed indigenous

knowledge without time-tested evidence and experience.

The author of the paper has raised all these issues to discuss the rationale of integrative health care. The lay people already follow plural medical practices according to their genius and perceptions about the strengths of various systems. The author has advocated this acumen and experience of people to establish an institutional structure in the public sector. People have a right of healthcare from plural medical systems, which is accessible and affordable to them.

The government has been creating new health cadres like ASHA without tapping the already existing traditional professionals such as Dai and herbalists. What the herbalists are following are little traditions, which have been translated as great traditions by academic and clinical masters like Charaka and Sushruta. The conceptual knowledge of local para-professionals needs to be up-scaled by institutionalizing the network bridging the little and great traditions.

The studies by Maharashtra Association of Anthropological Sciences in the States of Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra about the grass root practices of AYUSH in rural homes clearly bring out the sustainability of Indian health culture.^[2]

The author of this paper has made out an effective case for policy formulation and implementation of integrative health care in India by integrating the two national health policies to bestow the health rights to the people.

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