

# Centre to distribute only 50 drugs free under NLEM plan

## Govt Had Earlier Decided To Provide 348 Meds Under Scheme

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The union health ministry's target of distributing 50 drugs free under the free essential drug scheme is so much lower than the hundreds of drugs being provided by states with a functioning free drugs scheme that it has left health officials in these states puzzled.

After starting off by talking of distributing 348 drugs in the National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM) during the tenure of Dr Harsh Vardhan as health minister, it has been whittled down to just 50 drugs in keeping with the lower than budgeted spending the health sector is facing.

Under the programme, 348 drugs in the NLEM were to be provided free from 1.6 lakh sub-centres, 23,000 primary health centres, 5,000 community health centres and 640 district hospitals. Even this target was quite modest in comparison to Tamil Nadu supplying over 650 drugs, Rajasthan over 600 drugs, Kerala over 771 essential drugs and Karnataka about 370 drugs. Some of these

### STATES' MEDICINES FOR MASSES

State	Cost incurred (in ₹ crore)	Free drugs
Rajasthan Medical Services Corporation (RMSC)	295	607
Tamil Nadu Medical Services Corporation (TNMSC)	300	651
Kerala Medical Services Corporation Limited (KMSCL)	242	771 (essential)
Karnataka State Drugs Logistics and Warehousing Society (KSDLWS)	200	378 (and some surgical items)

states are also procuring surgical items and sutures for public health facilities.

Health officials in many of these states are puzzled by this "fixation on 50 drugs". "What will they cover with just 50 drugs? Which are these 50 drugs? We have not got any list so far. But we keep hearing that the Centre will provide funds for giving 50 drugs free. It is a ridiculously low number of drugs. We are already providing much more with our own funds and so we cannot be expected to take the Centre seriously on this," said a state health official who did not want to be named.

The proposal to supply generic medicines free of cost by the government was put forward by the high level expert group constituted by the Planning Commission in 2010 in its report submitted in November 2011. The Planning Commission's working group on drugs and food regulation calculated that with the Centre contributing 85% of the recurring costs and 100% of the capital cost, the 'free medicines for all in public health facilities' scheme would cost the Centre less than Rs 26,000 crore over the current five-year plan period (2012-17) or a little over Rs

5,000 crore annually.

"In all probability this list of 50 will include only drugs that are used at the primary level — which means, generally, very low cost medicines. The proposal is a retreat from commitments that the union government was on the verge of making five years back. It is also a retreat from what some states are already providing, with average costs of Rs 300 crore per year. This is particularly disappointing as public facilities were always meant to provide free drugs and it is only after the reforms in the 1990s that some states started introducing user fees on drugs," said Dr Amit Sen-gupta of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan a network of organizations working on public health issues.

After the UPA government promised distribution of free medicines through public health facilities, in September 2012, the then health minister announced that Rs 1,300 crore would be disbursed to states for purchase of medicines and setting up of a central procurement agency for bulk procurement of drugs. However, the money was never allocated and the scheme never took off.

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