

Shocking & unbelievable!

A further cut in health budget is suicidal

AS though the present healthcare scenario was not dismal enough, the government has reportedly decided to slash the health budget by 20 per cent. It will worsen the health of the nation. The cut is done to check the fiscal deficit for 2014-15. Barring the successful polio drive, which was supported by several international agencies, India can't boast of any achievement on the health front. In 2012 the number of TB cases was at 3.1 million, out of the 8.7 million cases globally. Approximately 65.1 million Indians live with diabetes today and half of them are ignorant of their disease. More newborns die in India than in poorer neighbours such as Bangladesh, and preventable illnesses such as diarrhoea kill more than a million children every year.

As such India's expenditure on healthcare is among the lowest in the world at just about 1 per cent of the GDP, whereas the US spends 8.3 per cent of its GDP. The decision is more shocking because Prime Minister Narendra Modi had aroused high hopes about upgrading basic health infrastructure by making medical services more affordable for the poor and lowering the cost of medicines before coming to power. Generic drugs were high on the new government's agenda. It is in rural India, which depends on the government-run healthcare system, that most diseases take the shape of an epidemic due to ignorance and poverty.

Incidentally, private sector healthcare is growing at 15 per cent annually, thanks to an expanding middle class. This cut would mean further reducing the efforts for awareness campaigns and control of the spread of community diseases. What will be the fate of the HIV control programmes and an alarming growth of drug-resistant TB in India? Democratically elected governments do not cut on healthcare even when there is zero per cent growth in the economy. The government can find several other means to reduce the fiscal deficit; it should not be done at the cost of public health.

Gova.