

There's an important role for the public sector in pharma policy'

any medicines under price control if it is in the larger interest of the public.

A GoM is there, but it has not met even once after it got constituted almost a year before. The main complaint against your ministry is that you never asked Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar, chairman of this GoM, to convene its meeting. Is it true?

We have not done that yet. But we will do it in the next few weeks. I will request the chairman of the GoM and the Cabinet minister for chemicals and fertilisers to look into this matter in June itself. The pharmaceutical sector is so important and I was expecting that Parliament will debate on the pharma policy and demand its speedy finalisation. At least this issue should be debated in Parliament, which is the right forum where such views can be expressed and policy decided. Similarly, we may also call a meeting of the Pharmaceutical Advisory Forum (an informal grouping of drug regulatory officials, pharmaceutical industry, civil society groups, etc), with some new members, next month.

Ministry's flagship programme Jan Aushadhi, the medical shops to sell low-cost generic medicines, have not taken off in the projected manner. The number of shops are less and the range of

medicines are even lesser. How do you see this?

The need for a generic campaign is very important. From the beginning, I have been wanting to take up this campaign (for generic medicines) in such a manner that low-cost medicines reach every nook and corner of the country. But, somehow, things are not moving and I am not very happy on this. I admit that though we have said we will sell 350 medicines through the Jan Aushadhi route, you will hardly find 60-70 medicines there. So, the supply chain needs to be strengthened, the monitoring has to be done properly. The public sector needs to play a very vital role here.

I have called a meeting on Jan Aushadhi on June 16 to take stock of the progress so far. If there is at least one day's debate on Jan Aushadhi (in Parliament), every MP, I am sure, will want this to be set up in their constituencies. I strongly feel for that and we will take it up to its logical end.

The government had launched a drug information helpline to give information on the availability of cheaper medicine options to general public. Even that failed to take off.

I agree. It was not in the right track. Now I have given instructions to National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) to launch a (mobile) SMS service for round-the-

clock information about drugs. Suppose a doctor prescribes a medicine, the patient can SMS the name of the drug to a particular SMS number, and the person will immediately be notified a list of the same medicine of other companies with comparative prices. He will have a choice of five or seven. So, you know what the price is, what are the alternatives that are available, etc. We are working on it.

Is it going to be on a national level? When will this service be rolled out?

Yes, it will be a national roll out and should be ready in a month or two. It will be operated by NPPA.

The government is talking about a huge allocation of funds to the health sector in the 12th Five-Year Plan. Have you made any suggestions to ensure it covers medicines?

For an ordinary person, medicine cost is about 80 per cent of his healthcare spend. So, if you reduce the cost of medicine, you save something for the expansion of (healthcare) infrastructure. The thrust, thus, should be to reduce the cost of medicine. Let me illustrate.

Suppose a person gets a healthcare insurance cover of ₹30,000 under (central government's) health insurance scheme) Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna and ₹8,000 is earmarked for medicines. Then you save half of it just by



switching over to generic medicines instead of branded medicines.

How do you see the increasing trend of mergers and takeovers in pharmaceutical sector?

The commerce ministry has circulated a discussion paper on this. The current (foreign direct investment) policy allows 100 per cent FDI in pharma sector. So, anybody can take over any company. But the apprehension here is that if MNCs take over these companies, there may emerge a monopoly situation and the prices of medicines may go up.

The inter-ministerial panel is looking at these issues. Compulsory licensing provisions (to allow Indian companies to produce low-cost versions of patented medicines) have also come under discussion. My view is that all ministries should together assess what would be the impact of such developments and an opinion has to be formulated. So, a decision will depend on whether these apprehensions are correct or not. We are seriously studying this matter. We have to listen to the domestic industry, and also the (foreign) multinational companies. This issue will also be part of

examples of companies that have been taken over by foreign firms changing their India priorities?

Any company being taken over by another company should not result in non-availability of products which they had developed using public funds. That is against the public interest. I can only say that past experiences will always help and guide us to keep checks and balances when we frame future policies (on venture funding). We need to ensure that public money is spent for public good.

How do you expect to revamp government-owned drug companies? Especially when past experiences are not so encouraging?

A lot of patented medicines are going off-patent the world over. Once it happens, a lot of generic production will take place. So, the public sector, with its infrastructure and infusion of some funds, can be a viable proposition. If they are professionally run, the possibilities are immense.

The general perception among stakeholders in the healthcare sector about the chemicals and the department ministry and the department of pharmaceuticals is that the ministry is missing in action. Do you agree?

I am trying to do whatever is possible within the area of my influence.

the policy discussion that will be taken up to the GoM.

What is the status of a venture capital fund proposed by the ministry some time earlier?

We had proposed the setting up of a venture capital fund for drug research. It (the proposal) is with the Planning Commission. We need more funds to promote research, as we are yet to develop a single new molecule. So, a big interest-free research fund is required.

Will there be any rider when we provide funds to companies, as we have seen