

Readers' Views

HEALTH CARE CONCERNS

At our recent Editorial Board Meeting, *grave concerns were expressed about the ongoing processes of globalisation and impoverishment in India*, the loss of people's lands and livelihoods, the struggles of the workers and farmers to survive, the nutritional crisis among children and pregnant women, the sufferings of so many sick people who are unable to pay their medical expenses and even to get the needed healthcare, etc. We therefore decided to ask people to *share what concerns them most in the present health situation and system*. The following are a few replies... **Dear readers, what are your own concerns?**

1. Who Benefits from our Health Care System?

Sr. Elizabeth Vadakekara

About 60% of the people of our country are affected by the cycle of poverty, ill-health and diseases. Health is not only a function of medical care but also of the overall integrated development of society. More than half of the health care needs of the people in the villages are very basic and do not need hospitalisation. However, *the health system lacks specific measures to integrate the health services with wider economic and social development*. Statistics reveal that diarrhoea, malaria and tuberculosis continue to be killer diseases. Every year 2,200,000 infants and children die from preventable diseases, and 100,000 mothers die at childbirth.

Communicable diseases are becoming more difficult to combat because of the development of resistant strains of vectors, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and the emergence of killer diseases like HIV/AIDS. Unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation facilities add to the spread

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of communicable diseases. Changing lifestyles, food habits and nutritional deficiencies contribute to the escalation of *non-communicable life-ailments* like cancer and diabetes as well as of starvation deaths and suicides.

During the past two decades, the private sector is flourishing. The Indian health care system is perhaps one of the most privatised in the world with around 80% of the health care expenditure borne privately. In addition to the increasing financial burden on the people, this corrodes the quality of care in the public health sector. Instead of being a comprehensive universal health care system, our health care policy promotes selective and targeted programmes. *The public health sector is thus weakened*. There is also the decline of public investments and expenditures in the health sector, which further lessens the accessibility of the health services to the poor. The primary health centers that are expected to provide medical care to the vast majority in the rural areas are ineffective due to the unavailability of medical staff and the lack of facilities and resources. The focus is also on curative services instead of the intended emphasis on preventive aspects. **All these realities point to the abysmal health scenario of our country.**

About 75% of the health care infrastructure is concentrated in the urban areas where only 27% of people live. The rising costs of medicines and technological investments and the huge salaries paid to the specialised professionals increase the cost and thereby make it more difficult for the poor to access the services. The good intentions of serving the poor and the marginalised through health care institutions like hospitals remain a dream because of the high costs of the services in this competitive commercialised world and in the absence of government subsidies and social security schemes. Thus, *health care services are becoming more and more unaffordable and inaccessible to the poor*.

Given this scenario, **the challenge before us is to increasingly channel our resources on the prevention of diseases and the promotion of health and wellness**. *The question is, how to enable people to take charge of their own health and empower themselves to demand their rights in spite of all the setbacks at different levels!*

2. How to Improve the Life and Health of Tribals and Dalits in Interior Villages?

Sr. Theresiamma

Radha was a 25-year-old tribal woman, married to Karuppan. They had two children, aged 7 and 3. Being the youngest in the family, Radha was the pet of her parents and brothers. When we visited her village to encourage parents to send their children for study, Radha was always friendly, cheerful and hard-working.

When she was 8-month pregnant, Radha had severe abdominal pain one Saturday evening. The village mid-wife said Radha had labour pains and tried her best to deliver the baby, but without success. The villagers advised her husband and parents to take her to the hospital, but she was afraid of an operation. She said, "May I die at home rather than in a hospital." She delivered twins on the second day but died. One child died and the other survived.

When we reached the village, her parents and brothers told us with a feeling of helplessness, "What can we do, sister? The hospital is 32 km away, and only a few buses go to the town." Her husband was walking around, deeply discouraged and making preparations for her funeral. Most of the people said, "It was her destiny. We are destined to live and die like this. *There is nobody to help us.*"

In the same village, a 34-year-old man, Kamachi, father of 5 children, had chest pain in the middle of the night. There was no vehicle around, and the first bus was due to come at 8 am. But Kamachi died of a heart attack at 6 am. Afterwards, people were encouraged to approach the health officials. An enquiry was made. Now, a health staff visits the village every month and gives some medicines. But how much will it help?

Many children, women and men die like this in interior villages, due to poverty, the non-availability of health facilities, the lack of knowledge and transport, etc. **Who is responsible for their life and death? Will there ever be liberation for these ignored children of God?**

3. My Concerns for a 'Healthy' India

Mary Pullattu

India is a country of many languages, cultures and religions. It has a long history and precious traditions. Our spiritual heritage, moral

values, strong family ties and other riches give us a strong base for peaceful and harmonious living. *Will all these prosper or perish?*

We seem to forget that *personal discipline and social consciousness are important to build a clean environment and healthy atmosphere.* When I look at the health situation, I feel we won't get an atmosphere for healthy living, unless the public and the government adopt certain measures to prevent diseases and promote health. We need safe drinking water, proper food, housing and sanitation. As the years go by, health professionals think of creating specialty hospitals and hi-tech privatised health care that only the rich can afford. *But is health only for the rich?*

If health is for all, how to provide sufficient nutritious food for people below poverty line? How to get sanitation facilities for the urban and rural poor? And clean drinking water for the poor majority? How can our people develop the social consciousness of keeping the environment clean?

We are developing a wrong culture. We use public places and open spaces for toilet needs. We throw waste everywhere. When we enter a town, it is the dirt that meets us. It is high time that we become concerned with providing public toilets and maintaining them.

Soft drinks like Pepsi and Coca-Cola are available in every nook and corner of the country, but clean drinking water is too costly for the rural and urban poor. People have to walk miles or wait for hours to get a pot of water. When I see hundreds of people around me suffering from anaemia and malnourishment, how can I think of health care for the people? How can people get health care when everywhere there is widening socio-economic inequality, the destruction of the natural environment, and corruption and injustices?

Can we think of a new system where people protect the environment, enjoy sanitation facilities, maintain public toilets, use dustbins, harvest water, plant trees and develop watershed programmes? Can we think of environmental education for all the children of India, and its practice everywhere? Can we think of providing enough medicines, equipments and personnel in our health centres, especially for those who have no choice?

Can we think of abolishing poverty and socio-economic inequalities, injustices and corruption, and get employment and food for all our people? **Can we safeguard our moral values and spiritual heritage?** *Can we learn to care for others and build a better life for all?*

Instead of thinking of personal gains, which is the greatest sin today, can we develop our social consciousness, a sense of commitment and responsibility for our fellow human beings and the future generations? If we can, India will then be the most powerful and rich country in the world, whatever may be our economic and technological development. **Can our country fulfill such dreams? When will India answer these concerns of mine? What can I myself do about them?**