Associate Editor's Column

Courts hold the Only Hope for Patients

Ever since the present government took office in the Centre, a sustained concern for outcome based planning has been seen. On the health front, there were attempts to cap the prices of drugs and medicines and indeed some headway was made in respect of a good number of medicines. But after that the project seems to have got bogged down due to bureaucratic lethargy. Not long ago, we had the diktat from the Health Ministry to cap the prices of stents used in cardiac treatment even though the unscrupulous doctors and profit-motivated hospitals made a mockery of it by raising the cost of operation and medicare facilities.

A somewhat sticky problem has been the practice prevalent in most private clinics and hospitals where doctors have compelled the hapless patients to buy medicines at exorbitant rates from the chemists’ shop situated on their premises — for obvious reasons. That has resulted in adding to the woes of the patients. Take, for example, the Streptokinase injection prescribed in situations of heart attack. While the actual cost of this injection is said to be between Rs. 700-900, the MRP is Rs. 9000/-. For simple antibiotics, the generic version costs around Rs. 45 for a pack of ten, but the proprietary version of any company could be ten times higher, i.e., Rs. 540.

The situation is same in case of medical tests too. For an MRI test, the prescribing doctor’s commission is said to be around Rs. 2000-3000! If you don’t reveal the doctor’s name, even then the price charged would be the same. There is professional ethics followed in the lab afterall! Chances are that your doctor will not accept the findings of a lab not recommended by him. Many small clinics which don’t have pathological labs attached would go a step further and collect the sample (in most cases, urine or blood) and thus afford you the facility of not having to go to the lab concerned!

What should the patient do? In a country where everyone is concerned about making money, throwing all other concerns to the wind, the media would, halfheartedly sometimes — when some mediaman gets fleeced — run a story or two, otherwise it is happy covering fashions and films or making mountain of little molehills. Besides, the pharmaceutical companies and the medical practitioners’ lobbies are so strong that they can easily manage a smooth ride. One recalls the fight put up by one Dr Doisroth of New York against the medical lobby. Even though he himself was a doctor, he launched an awareness campaign in this regard in India. But things stand where these were.

Mercifully, the judiciary is one pillar of our democracy where an ordinary man can hope to get heard. In May this year, a PIL that is still under consideration, was filed in the Supreme Court by Mr Vijay Pal Dalmia whose wife was admitted to a private hospital for treatment of breast cancer. Dalmia had to buy medicines from the shop within the hospital compound at exorbitant price even though the same medicine was available outside at a much cheaper rate. Not every person can have the courage and means to approach the honourable court, so Dalmia’s petition is truly in public interest. “These acts of financial malpractices by hospitals all over India are against humanity, morality and the right of the citizens to live a dignified and respectable life, and the fact that it is also obligatory on the governments to provide the best and affordable healthcare to citizens,” says the petitioner. Let’s hope some good emerges out of it to provide succour to poor patients in India.

— Jagdish Batra