

The Hindu & BL Editorials

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Boost for health



Health budget should go beyond vaccines and take a long-term view

Like in the rest of the world, India's health infrastructure came under considerable strain in 2020, with 10.6 million Covid cases (so far) and perhaps over a million requiring hospitalisation. With India having less than one bed per thousand people and one doctor for a population of 1,456 (Economic Survey 2019-20) against the WHO norm of 1:1000, it is apparent that physical infrastructure, as well as the quality and quantity of human capital needs upgradation. This calls for a reordering of priorities in the Budget as a whole by stepping up health outlays (at ₹67,000 crore out of the Budget size of ₹30.4 lakh crore in 2020-21, it works out to just over 2 per cent), and relooking at allocations within the health Budget itself. Even if the Budget were to set aside about ₹10,000 crore towards the Covid vaccination push to inoculate more than 300 million people, this should not come at the cost of existing outlays on health. With Covid cases on the decline, the Centre and States should wait and watch before offering free vaccinations across the board. The health Budget should be seen as a growth-boosting vehicle, with allocations being doubled to at least 5 per cent of the total Budget. The ₹15,000 crore allocation towards health infrastructure in the Atmanirbhar package, announced in May, marked the right step forward and should be sustained.

Viewing health and pharma as a single sector, the focus areas should be: beefing up decentralised health 'wellness' centres under the aegis of Ayushman Bharat programme (Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana) so that mass vaccination programmes, besides routine healthcare situations, can proceed without any hitch; ramping up the Ayushman Bharat's coverage; stepping up investments in research to develop indigenous solutions in terms of vaccines and medicines; and ramping up self-reliance in bulk drugs.

Ayushman Bharat has expanded its footprint and it is just as well that the Centre is considering a data integration exercise to cover larger populations, as reported in this newspaper. Since September 2018, over one crore people have received treatment with an outgo of close to ₹15,000 crore. However, its outlays too need to be raised from current levels of ₹6,400 crore. A greater variety of packages needs to be devised to ensure that patients do not slip through the cracks. Although the Economic Survey 2019-20 claims that out-of-pocket expenses have fallen as a proportion of total health expenditure to less than 60 per cent, it is important that the role of PM-JAY in plugging catastrophic expenditure be ascertained. However, an over-reliance on insurance and PPP can have its pitfalls. An investment in medical colleges, beyond a few islands of excellence such as the AIIMS, can bring down costs and ramp up quality of health services. The Centre could focus on medical education, infrastructure and research in an expanded health Budget.

Managing the rollout: On addressing vaccine hesitancy

The government must investigate and publicise the reasons for vaccine hesitancy

Nearly a fortnight after it won approval for Covaxin under 'restricted emergency use' conditions, Bharat Biotech has formally informed, via its website, that the **vaccine is inadvisable in those with a history of allergies, fever and bleeding disorders**. Those on medication or blood thinners and whose immunity has been compromised have also been told not to take the vaccine. This is along with a recommendation that the vaccine is **not to be given to the pregnant or the lactating**. A **similar set of restrictions has been given** to prospective recipients of Covishield too, the vaccine now available in greater numbers and developed by the Serum Institute of India. Ordinarily, a fact sheet as well as product insert — a note that accompanies every vial of a vaccine — is a mandatory formality. However, the context in which the two vaccines are being administered in India imbues them with magnified significance. Covaxin has been rolled out with **insufficient evidence of its efficacy**, or whether it is actually protective. The vaccines have been so far made available to health-care and sanitation workers and other frontline staff, who **do not have a choice** in the vaccine being administered, but can decide not to be inoculated. Nine States, according to data provided by the Health Ministry, have rates of over 70%, and three States, less than 40%. More than half the States fall somewhere in the middle. While **India has given jobs to nearly 786,000** of those eligible, it is far short of the target of 1.4 million.

It is certainly early days, and presumably there will be acceleration in the days ahead. However, the government is yet to explain, based on feedback from the States, why the vaccine — the single most awaited product of 2021 — has not seen more enthusiastic queues. This, in spite of Health Ministry officials underlining that adverse events following vaccination have been negligibly low, accentuating the safety of the product. Hospitals have begun internal campaigns exhorting senior doctors to get a shot to "build confidence" and officials in the highest government offices say that not opting for a vaccine, when one is available, amounts to dereliction "in duty". The adoption trend is unsurprising. The medically literate, as many recipients are, realise the difference between a vaccine being 'safe' and 'efficacious'. Moreover, the declining trend in new

cases as well as the knowledge that an array of vaccines will be available in the months ahead further contribute to the temporary 'hesitancy' pervading hospitals now. A way forward for the government to inspire confidence is to monitor, report and be forthright with the challenges it is facing. There should also be greater coordination between the Centre and the States on sharing, investigating and publicising reasons for **hesitancy**.

Polls apart: On Uganda under Museveni

Uganda under Museveni needs to reinforce the people's faith in democratic processes

Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's 76-year-old leader who has been in power since 1986, **won another five-year term** in the January 14 presidential election, but the contested result has pushed the country into its worst political crisis in decades. According to Uganda's Electoral Commission, he won nearly 59% of the vote, while his main rival, Robert Kyagulanyi, a pop musician better known by his stage name Bobi Wine, secured 34%. Mr. Wine has alleged voter fraud, which the government was quick to dismiss, while putting him and several other leaders of his National Unity Platform under house arrest. The government cracking down on the opposition is not new, but this time, there were widespread reports of state repression of Mr. Wine's movement in the run-up to the election. He was detained several times, his rallies broken up by security personnel, and the Internet shut down and social networks blocked before the election. Mr. Museveni's government refused to accredit election monitors from the West, saying the U.S., after its election crisis, did not have the authority to monitor the elections. Observers from Africa have documented irregularities, including illegal opening of ballot boxes and arrests of members of civil society groups observing elections.

According to Ugandan law, Mr. Wine has 15 days to prove election irregularities, which is unlikely to happen as he is under house arrest and **party offices have been raided** by security personnel. The Internet was restored almost a week after the shutdown, but social media platforms, which his campaign used to connect with the public, are still blocked. It appears that Mr. Museveni, whose National Resistance Movement came to power by waging a guerrilla war in the 1980s, seems determined to prevent Mr. Wine even coming close to power. Uganda has long been torn by coups and violence before Mr. Museveni's rise. Even after Idi Amin, the infamous dictator, was overthrown in 1979, politics remained volatile and violent. Mr. Museveni, when he captured power, promised reforms and stability. Consolidating power rather quickly, he offered a stable government and made Uganda an ally of the West in the fight against radicalism in East Africa. But his grip on power tightened and he forcefully kept the opposition below the radar. In 2005, Mr. Museveni amended the Constitution to remove the presidential term limits and in 2017, signed a law scrapping the age limit of 75 for presidential candidates. He might continue in office, but his greed for power and disregard for a fair electoral process and rights, coupled with economic woes, have already left cracks in his support base. Mr. Wine, in a short span, has emerged as the President's most potent political rival. Mr. Museveni must realise that short-circuiting the democratic process might force Uganda to repeat its history of violent transfer of power.