

Child Deaths at Gorakhpur

Pathetic Conditions of Health and Medical Services

The death of more than 70 children, who are undergoing treatment for Acute Encephalitis syndrome (AES), allegedly due to lack of Oxygen had invited wide spread condemnation. This shows not only the criminal negligence on the part of authorities and callous apathy of the government, but also the pathetic conditions prevailed in Health services in the country.

The Oxygen supplier to the hospital several times wrote letters to the authorities requesting clearance of pending bills to the tune of Rs. 68 lakhs and expressed his inability to further supplies of Oxygen if the bills were not cleared, as the producer company withheld supplies to him. Vexed with the delay, media reported, he stopped supplying Oxygen and that resulted in the death of children.

The government's defence, in response to the lack of Oxygen caused children's death, is that many more have died last year when there was oxygen available. It is outrageous to say the least. Even if it is contended children did not die for lack of Oxygen, the gross mismanagement of Oxygen supplies was indefensible in itself and criminally negligent because children could have died.

One has to look at the broader contours of the issue at stake. The first case of encephalitis was reported from Gorakhpur in 1978. The epidemic was recurring every year in the district and has killed over 5000 people since 2010. Its primary cause was not identified until this year. Within a few years of its outbreak, the doctors confirmed it was due to Japanese Encephalitis (JE) virus, which was confirmed by the National Institute of Virology. Yet the government started vaccination programme of JE only in 2007. Why it took so long a time?

Even after the mass vaccination programme, the recurrence of AES continued in Gorakhpur district. Common sense dictates that some other causative factor is leading to the epidemic along with JE. Yet all the government research institutions focussed on testing for known causative organisms of encephalitis. The real research to find out infecting organism was not taken up. Why is it so?

Finally, it was found by the ICMR and some other researchers that the causative organism for AES in Gorakhpur was Scrub Typhus in 62.7 cases, while 21 per cent of cases tested positive for JE. The crucial question is how much long time will be spent to take the measures that contain scrub Typhus infections?

The immediate cause of death of children at Gorakhpur teaching hospital is the criminal negligence on the part of health authorities in managing the Oxygen supplies. The core of the problem is much more and lies in the very system of our medical and health services.

When an epidemic breaks and continues to recur, it is the responsibility of the government to intervene and take up appropriate measures to contain it, both short term and long term. Whether is Yogi or Akhilesh or their predecessors, the response from the government is nothing less than apathy towards the dying children and people.

It is a fact that many of the patients are reaching the Teaching hospital in critical condition in which saving their lives will be an uphill task. It is easy to blame the untrained medical practitioners. But even well trained doctors will be hapless without the backing up of well oiled centralised machinery, that provides up-to-date information on the epidemic and infrastructure, which the government could only provide. Lack of availability of well equipped laboratory facilities and non-affordability of its costs by the parents of the children, who are from the poorer classes of people, makes the doctor to depend on guess work to

treat the patient. One cannot expect a poor father to rush to the district head quarters, which is often 50 to 100 km away when his ward struck with fever. The non-availability of medical services or rather wanton denial of it to majority of population is at the core of the problem.

It is equally of health services in India. Diarrhoea remains the second leading cause of death in children under five years, killing an estimated 321 children every day in 2015, according to a May 2017 **factsheet** by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Many more people are dying of communicable diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, TB, JE and other vector born diseases that are easily preventable provided there is pure drinking water supply, hand wash and clean environment. Even after 70 years of independence, the government failed to provide these services to its citizens not because of lack of knowledge, competent skilled personnel, and technical feasibility, but for wanton neglect.

While the Indian Space Research Organisation could achieve the most complicated technologies to explore the outer space, the premier medical research institutions in the country lagged behind in their response to the AES. It is definitely due to failure of the political leadership to imbue scientific temper, dare to explore the unknown, and provided needed direction to these institutions.

The Tragedy at Gorakhpur hospital is not an isolated one but a typical case of public health system caught in wanton neglect, corruption, failure in planning and administration and to top them all the unwillingness of the political leadership and successive government to address the problems confronted in providing a basic service to the people.
