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Your Space: Doctors, Hospitals, guilty of unethical activities

Even dead patients are secretly kept in ICU, away from the unsuspecting patient's relatives, only to hike up the hospital bill to make a bigger profit, says Kunal Saha.

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This is with reference to recent news reports on attacks on doctors in Pune (3 assaults in 1 month: Pune docs say 'protect our lives', October 10).

It has become a mundane affair these days to find news of patients dying from seemingly negligent therapy followed by irate mob attacking the doctors or vandalising hospitals. In almost every such incident, while the patient's family and friends partly

allege that the patient died solely due to lack of adequate medical care, the hospital authority invariably refutes all allegations of medical negligence and always claim that doctors did everything possible to save the patient.

There is little argument that the overall standard of Indian healthcare system has been in sharp decline as evident from the horrific stories of serious injuries and deaths of innocent patients from gross medical negligence appearing in the news almost on a daily basis. However, it must be said that doctor bashing or hospital vandalism cannot be supported even in the event when a patient dies from genuinely gross medical negligence, because two wrongs can never make a right.



There is no denying that like all other areas of public services in India, widespread corruption has also plagued our medical education and healthcare delivery system.

Starting from admission to private medical colleges by poor-quality students from wealthy families by simply paying a hefty 'capitation fee', there is hardly any limit for unethical activities by doctors and hospitals in India today. It is common knowledge today that many patients are referred by doctors to a known

diagnostic centre for expensive medical investigations with the sole purpose to receive a financial kickback ('commission').

Private hospitals and nursing homes routinely lure the hapless patients with illicit advertisements only to rip them off with exorbitant medical bills as patient's relatives/friends remain as virtual hostage with their loved one fighting for life in the hospital bed as there are no checks and balances or proper audit for our healers.

Even dead patients are secretly kept in ICU, away from the unsuspecting patient's relatives, only to hike up the hospital bill to make a bigger profit. Even the most reckless and negligent doctors have no reason to change because there is hardly any chance that they would be held accountable and lose their practising license by the doctor-only members of the state medical council.

It is truly unfortunate to see even the most peaceful and law-abiding person momentarily lose control from the sudden and severe shock after seeing his loved one dying in front of his own eyes from palpable act of 'medical negligence' to take laws into his own hands and lashing out at the doctors or ravaging the

hospital in a vain attempt to find justice.

But who is responsible for the present unsustainable situation of frequent attacks on doctors and hospitals by ordinary people?

To find the right answer for this important question, we must first try to appreciate the underlying cause of frequent violence and physical attacks on doctors.

Incidence of 'medical negligence' is not unknown in developed countries like USA and UK, although it is a far more common occurrence in developing countries like India.

In USA/UK, doctors are regularly found and held guilty for medical negligence or unethical conduct both by the regulatory state medical boards (like 'medical councils' in India) as well as the court of law where juries often award enormous compensation against the errant doctor/hospital.

However, it is unimaginable in USA or UK that aggrieved members of the victim's family attacking doctors or ransacking hospital after their loved one died in a hospital from alleged "medical negligence".

Ordinary people living in these countries have trust in the medical justice delivery system both in the medical board/council (where

non-doctor members are also part of the board/council) and court of law.

Unfortunately, there is absolutely no credibility for the doctor-only 'medical councils' in India. Despite hundreds of complaints against the wayward and negligent medicos, hardly any doctor is found guilty or punished by the medical councils in India.

The Delhi High Court recently dubbed the Medical Council of India (MCI), highest medical regulatory body in the country, as a 'den of corruption' and then sitting MCI president,

Dr Ketan Desai, was caught red-handed by the CBI in 2010 for taking a multi-crore rupees bribe allegedly in exchange of granting recognition to a private medical college.

Even in the court of law in India, cases against negligent doctors routinely lingers for decades and in absence of honest opinions from other medical experts, most cases are dismissed at the end. Thus, unlike in the West, ordinary people in India feel that there is little or no real chance for finding equitable justice against the powerful doctors and hospitals even after their loved one succumbs to negligent therapy.

Sheer frustration from the helplessness and inability to get justice may sometimes push some people over the edge as they opt for

physical violence against the doctors in blind rage for justice. There is no argument that the onus to solve this unfortunate situation lies primarily on doctors and the judicial system.

Medical councils in India must be an honest and transparent body with “good” doctors who would not hesitate to identify the ‘bad apples’ hiding in the medical community to restore public trust on our healers. Not long ago, doctors used to occupy the highest seat, just next to God, in Indian society. Public trust and real hope for medical justice must be restored to stop the unfortunate and frequent incidence of doctor bashing and hospital vandalism in India.

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