

FROM THE DESK OF THE GROUP EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Dr KK Aggarwal
Padma Shri Awardee
President, Heart Care Foundation of India
Group Editor-in-Chief, IJCP Group

Revisiting 2018: A Roundup of Top Health Stories in India

2018 has been an eventful year for the country, especially in the medical arena. A lot has happened and it has left all of us in anticipation of the coming year 2019.

MBBS curriculum revised after more than two decades ... an ambitious target for complete elimination of tuberculosis (TB) from the country by 2025 ... legislations have been passed some only by the Lower House some have been tabled in the Parliament and are yet to be discussed before they can be enacted ... outbreaksnatural calamities.... These were but few of the stories that made headlines this year.

India took a step closer to universal health coverage with the launch of Ayushman Bharat.

But, perhaps the most momentous of all events this year was the dissolution of autonomy of medical profession and replacement of the Medical Council of India (MCI) with a Board of Governors (BoG).

Let's take a look at some of the top health stories in India in 2018. These have been listed in no specific order.

MEDICAL COUNCIL OF INDIA DISSOLVED AND SO WAS THE AUTONOMY OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

The MCI was dissolved with immediate effect on Sept. 26, 2018 and superseded by a BoG after the Govt. brought an Ordinance called the Indian Medical Council (Amendment) Ordinance, 2018 to set up a committee to run the MCI until Parliament passes the National Medical Commission (NMC). A 7-member BoG was announced with Dr VK Paul as its chairman.

NEW MBBS CURRICULUM

The MBBS curriculum was revised. In November, the new undergraduate curriculum was finalized by the MCI BoG. It will be implemented in the 2019-20 academic session. The "Competency-based Under-Graduate Curriculum for the Indian Medical Graduate" focuses on medical ethics, better doctor-patient relationship and outcome-based learning. Another new feature is the introduction of elective subjects. Now students can pick up subjects of choice and dedicated time has been allotted for self-directed learning and co-curricular activities. The new MBBS curriculum has a course called Attitude, Ethics and Communication (AETCOM), which will run across years. Students will be assessed for how they communicate with patients; how they counsel people for organ donations or other challenging procedures; how sensitively do they offer care and obtain consent. All these things will count along with competencies and skills.

NATIONAL MEDICAL COMMISSION BILL, 2017

The government is hoping to pass the NMC Bill. The Bill is currently pending in Parliament and will be first taken up in the Lok Sabha. The Bill seeks to replace the MCI with a NMC as a regulatory body for medical education and practice in the country. Among other provisions, the Bill establishes four autonomous Boards under the supervision of the NMC: Under-Graduate Medical Education Board, Post-Graduate Medical Education Board, Medical Assessment and

Rating Board and Ethics and Medical Registration Board.

The Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Dec. 29, 2017; it was referred to a Standing Committee on January 4, 2018 on account of opposition from the Indian Medical Association (IMA) to certain provisions of the Bill. The Standing Committee submitted its report on March 20, 2018 following which the Union Cabinet approved certain official amendments to the NMC Bill. It is unlikely to get passed seeing the tough stand taken by the IMA.

AYUSHMAN BHARAT - PRADHAN MANTRI JAN AROGYA YOJANA LAUNCHED

Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, the world's largest government funded healthcare program, was launched by the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi at Ranchi, Jharkhand on Sept. 23, 2018. It provides a cover of up to Rs. 5 lakhs per family per year, at any government or empanelled private hospital, for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization. More than 10 crore vulnerable entitled families - approximately 50 crore beneficiaries - will benefit from the scheme. The amount of 5 lakh would cover all investigations, medicine, pre-hospitalization expenses, etc. All pre-existing conditions are covered. There is no restriction on family size, age or gender.

INDIA SETS A TARGET FOR COMPLETE ELIMINATION OF TB BY 2025 AT THE DELHI END TB SUMMIT

"India is determined to address the challenge of TB in mission mode. I am confident that India can be free of TB by 2025. The global target for eliminating TB is 2030, but today I announce that the target for India to eliminate TB is 2025, five years before the global target," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he inaugurated the Delhi End TB Summit and launched the TB Free India Campaign on March 13, 2018.

The Delhi End TB Summit was jointly organized by the Government of India, Stop TB Partnership and WHO South East Asia Regional Office (SEARO).

SUPREME COURT ALLOWED "LIVING WILL" IN A LANDMARK DECISION

In a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court of India allowed an individual to draft a living will specifying that they not be put on life support, if they slip into an incurable coma. The order was passed by a five judge Constitutional bench comprising Chief Justice of India, which said "Human beings have the right to die with dignity." Though the judges gave four separate opinions, all of them were unanimous that a Living Will should be allowed, because an individual should

not be allowed to continue suffering in a vegetative state when they don't wish to continue living, and know well that they will not revive. However, the Apex Court has set forth strict guidelines on how to execute the mandate of the living will.

SUPREME COURT DECRIMINALIZES SECTION 377

In a historic and unanimous judgment, the Supreme Court of India has decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), as per which homosexuality is a punishable offence, stating that "*Section 377 is irrational, arbitrary and incomprehensible*" and termed "*sexual orientation as biological phenomenon, says any discrimination on this grounds is violative of fundamental rights*".

The Court said, "*The court must try to protect the dignity of every individual of the society, including people from LGBT community. Sexual orientation is natural and people have no control on it... consensual sex between adults in private space, which is not harmful to women or children, cannot be denied as it is a matter of individual choice.*"

SURROGACY (REGULATION) BILL 2018 PASSED BY THE LOK SABHA

The Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill 2018, which had been introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2016, was passed by the Lower House on Dec. 19, 2018. The Bill is to be debated in the Rajya Sabha and passed by the Upper House before it can be enacted.

The Bill prohibits commercial surrogacy, and allows altruistic surrogacy. Altruistic surrogacy does not involve any monetary compensation to the surrogate mother other than the medical expenses and insurance coverage during the pregnancy. The intending couple must be Indian citizens and married for at least 5 years with at least one of them being infertile. The surrogate mother has to be a close relative who has been married and has had a child of her own. Only Indian citizens can avail surrogacy.

Undertaking or advertising commercial surrogacy, exploiting the surrogate mother and selling or importing human embryo or gametes for surrogacy have been considered offences under the Bill with a penalty of 10 years and a fine of up to 10 lakh rupees.

CONSUMER PROTECTION BILL 2018 PASSED BY THE LOK SABHA

The Consumer Protection Bill 2018 was passed by the Lok Sabha on Dec. 20, 2018. The Bill, among other things, proposes setting up of the Consumer Disputes

Redressal Commission and forums at the District, State and National levels to examine and decide on consumer complaints. Appeals from the District Commissions will be heard by the State Commission and from the State Commission by the National Commission. Appeals from the National Commission will be heard by the Supreme Court.

The Bill has also defined the pecuniary jurisdiction of the three disputes redressal agencies, which have been substantially increased from those provided in the present Consumer Protection Act, 1986.

- For District Forum, the jurisdiction has been increased to Rs. 1 crore (from up to Rs. 20 lakh at present).
- For State Commission, the jurisdiction has been increased to between Rs. 1 crore and up to Rs. 10 crore (from more than 20 lakh but not exceeding Rs. 1 crore at present).
- For National Commission, the jurisdiction has been increased to above Rs. 10 crore (from more than 1 crore at present).

Other amendments proposed are as follows:

- District, state and national fora do not require judicial members.
- Not only persons but associations and other bodies can complain to consumer fora.
- Consumer Mediation cells at district, state and national level.
- District, state and national councils, which are advisory in nature.
- A Central Consumer Authority which has judicial powers, can conduct investigations, search and make judgments.

CABINET APPROVES ALLIED AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONS BILL, 2018

In November, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi approved the Allied and Healthcare Professions Bill, 2018 for regulation and standardization of education and services by allied and healthcare professionals. The Bill provides for setting up of an Allied and Healthcare Council of India and corresponding State Allied and Healthcare Councils which will play the role of a standard-setter and facilitator for professions of Allied and Healthcare.

The Bill will also have an overriding effect on any other existing law for any of the covered professions.

NIPAH VIRUS OUTBREAK IN KERALA

In May, an outbreak of the Nipah virus was reported from Kerala. It was localized in Kozhikode and Malappuram districts of Kerala and claimed 17 lives. The outbreak was officially declared over on June 10, 2018. This was the third outbreak reported in India.

An advisory released by the Health Ministry said that *“the Nipah virus disease is not a major outbreak and is only a local occurrence”*. The outbreak was traced to fruit bats. In July, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) confirmed fruit bats were the primary source of the virus.

ZIKA VIRUS OUTBREAK IN RAJASTHAN

The third outbreak of Zika virus in less than 2 years was reported in India from Jaipur in Rajasthan. The first case was reported in the end of September. More than 130 cases were detected. For the first time, during this epidemic, scientists found mosquitoes that were infected with the virus, indicating that it was being transmitted locally. Sequencing of five Zika virus strains collected during the Jaipur outbreak suggest that the known mutations linked to fetal microcephaly are not present in the current strain.

In January-February 2017, the first three cases of laboratory-confirmed Zika virus infection in India were detected in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. In the same year in July, transmission of Zika virus was also confirmed from Krishnagiri District in Tamil Nadu. The World Health Organization (WHO) puts India in category 2 in the classification of Zika's prevalence, which indicates an ongoing transmission of the virus.

HIV AND AIDS (PREVENTION AND CONTROL) ACT, 2017

The HIV and AIDS (Prevention and Control) Act, 2017 was notified by the Government and came into force from Sept. 10, 2018. The Act aims to end the epidemic by 2030 and safeguard the rights of people living with or affected by HIV by addressing HIV-related discrimination through legal accountability and establishing mechanisms for complaint enquiry and grievance redressal.

The Act lists various grounds on which discrimination against HIV-positive persons and those living with them is prohibited. These include the denial, termination, discontinuation or unfair treatment with regard to: (i) employment, (ii) educational establishments, (iii) healthcare services, (iv) residing or renting property,

(v) standing for public or private office and (vi) provision of insurance (unless based on actuarial studies). The Act also prohibits the requirement for HIV testing as a pre-requisite for obtaining employment or accessing healthcare or education.

ICMR HAS A NEW DIRECTOR GENERAL

Professor Balram Bhargava, Professor of Cardiology at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi took charge as the new Director General of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and Secretary of the Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

A NEW DIRECTOR GENERAL OF HEALTH SERVICES APPOINTED

Dr S Venkatesh is the new Director General of Health Services (DGHS).

A NEW DRUGS CONTROLLER GENERAL OF INDIA

Joint Drugs Controller Dr S Eswara Reddy was appointed as the new Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI).

NEW IMA NATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dr Santanu Sen, also a Member of Parliament, took over as the National President; Dr RV Asokan was elected as the Secretary General.

INDIA ASSUMES OFFICE OF CMAAO PRESIDENT-ELECT

Dr KK Aggarwal took over as the President-elect of Confederation of Medical Associations in Asia and Oceania (CMAAO).

SUPREME COURT BANS SALE OF BHARAT STAGE IV VEHICLES FROM APRIL 1, 2020

A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court headed by Justice Madan B Lokur has said that no Bharat Stage (BS)-IV vehicle shall be sold across the country with effect from April 1, 2020. The BS-VI emission norm would come into force from April 1, 2020 across the country.

The BS-IV norms have been enforced across the country since April 2017. In 2016, the Centre had announced that the country would skip the BS-V norms altogether and adopt BS-VI norms by 2020. The apex court was deciding whether grace period should be given to automobile manufacturers for the sale of BS-VI non-compliant vehicles after April 1, 2020.

MTNL PERFECT HEALTH MELA CELEBRATED ITS SILVER JUBILEE

The MTNL Perfect Health Mela, the annual flagship event of the Heart Care Foundation of India (HCFI), celebrated its silver jubilee with the theme "Affordable Healthcare". A National Campaign on Hands-only CPR 10 in collaboration with Ministry of Youth Affairs, Govt. of India, was launched on the inaugural day. "Evening Conclaves" thematic panel discussions with celebrity guests were the highlight of the Mela this year. Topics discussed at these Conclaves included antimicrobial resistance, indoor pollution, harm reduction, safe water and air, CSR, infertility and noncommunicable diseases.

A one-of-its-kind Spiritual Inter-Faith Conference on air, sanitation and antimicrobial resistance was also organized by HCFI along with the World Fellowship of Religions, in which eminent Dharma Gurus of all religions participated as speakers.

KERALA FLOODS

In August, Kerala battled its worst flood in 100 years. All 14 districts of the state were placed on red alert. According to the Kerala government, one-sixth of the total population of Kerala had been directly affected by the floods and related incidents. The Government of India declared it a Level 3 Calamity, or "calamity of a severe nature".

VIRAL LOAD TEST FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

The Viral Load testing for all People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) was launched by the Health Minister in February, as "a big step forward in treating and monitoring people living with HIV". The initiative will provide free of cost viral load testing for 12 lakh PLHIV on treatment in the country at least once a year. It will optimize the utilization of first-line regimens, thus preventing drug resistance. It will also help in strengthening 'Mission Sampark' in tracking LFU (Loss to Follow-Up) PLHIV.

GOVT. BAN ON MANUFACTURE OF OXYTOCIN FORMULATIONS SET ASIDE BY DELHI HIGH COURT

In May, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare restricted the manufacture of oxytocin formulations for domestic use to public sector only. It also banned the import of oxytocin and its formulations. This order was to come into effect from July 1, 2018.

As per the order, no private manufacturer would be allowed to manufacture the drug for domestic use. Only Karnataka Antibiotics & Pharmaceuticals

Ltd (KAPL), a public sector company, would be manufacturing this drug for domestic use and will supply the drug to registered hospitals and clinics in public and private sector directly. Oxytocin in any form or name would not be allowed to be sold through retail chemist.

But, on Dec. 14, the Hon'ble Delhi High Court set aside the Govt.'s decision to ban private firms from producing and selling oxytocin. The bench of Hon'ble Justice S Ravindra Bhat and Hon'ble Justice AK Chawla said that the government's decision was arbitrary and unreasonable and that there was no scientific basis behind the Center's decision restricting private companies from making or supplying the drug to prevent its alleged misuse in the dairy sector for increasing milk production.

CABINET APPROVES THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (AMENDMENTS) BILL, 2018

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi approved the Protection of Human Rights (Amendments) Bill, 2018 for better protection and promotion of human rights in the country.

NATIONAL VIRAL HEPATITIS CONTROL PROGRAM LAUNCHED

The National Viral Hepatitis Control Program was launched by the Health Minister on World Hepatitis Day (July 28) with the goal of ending viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030 in the country.

INDIA RETAINS THE WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA REGIONAL DIRECTOR POSITION

India retained the top WHO position in SEARO with Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh unanimously re-elected as Regional Director WHO South-East Asia for another 5-year term beginning February 2019. She is the first woman to have been elected to the position of Regional Director for WHO South-East Asia Region after an illustrious career in the Indian Civil Service, World Bank and WHO.

Last year Dr Soumya Swaminathan, an Indian Pediatrician and Director General ICMR and a clinical scientist known for her work on TB was appointed as the Deputy Director General of Programs at the WHO on Oct. 3, 2017.

ENDS CONTROVERSY

In August, the Ministry of Health released an advisory on Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS)

including e-cigarettes, Heat-Not-Burn devices, Vape, e-Sheesha, e-Nicotine Flavored Hookah, and the like products asking states not to allow its sale or distribution.

But on Dec. 28, Public Health England (PHE) released a new film showing the devastating harms that come from smoking, and how this can be avoided by switching to an e-cigarette or using another type of quit aid.

The film has been released as part of PHE's Health Harms campaign, which encourages smokers to attempt to quit, by demonstrating the personal harm to health from every single cigarette. The film features smoking expert Dr Lion Shahab and Dr Rosemary Leonard, visually demonstrating the high levels of cancer-causing chemicals and tar inhaled by an average smoker over a month, compared to not smoking or using an e-cigarette. Research estimates that while not risk-free, vaping is at least 95% less harmful than smoking.

Dr Lion Shahab, leading smoking cessation academic from University College London, said: *"The false belief that vaping is as harmful as smoking could be preventing thousands of smokers from switching to e-cigarettes to help them quit. Research we and others have conducted shows that vaping is much less harmful than smoking and that using e-cigarettes on a long-term basis is relatively safe, similar to using licensed nicotine products, like nicotine patches or gum. Using e-cigarettes or nicotine replacement such as patches or gum will boost your chances of quitting successfully."*

GOVT. BANS USE OF ANTIBODY TEST KITS TO DIAGNOSE MALARIA

The Health Ministry prohibited the manufacture for sale, sale and distribution of the test kits used in Antibody Detecting Rapid Diagnostic Tests for routine diagnosis of malaria after it was found that the test was triggering false alarms. As per the notification, although the test is economical, the false positive rates in endemic areas were high. People with fever who tested positive in the rapid antibody test, were later tested negative in antigen test.

PLASTIC WASTE MANAGEMENT (AMENDMENT) RULES NOTIFIED

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules 2018. The amended rules lay down that the phasing out of multilayered plastic (MLP) is now applicable to MLP, which are "non-recyclable, or non-energy recoverable, or with no alternate use."