

Bitter pill for hospitals, patients

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Not allowing private & charitable trust-run hospitals to accept old currencies is hurting



Mumbai, Hyderabad November 18:

Just days after the government called back ₹ 500 and ₹ 1,000 notes, Mumbai woke to the tragic news of possibly the youngest victim of the demonetisation move.

A newborn died after he was allegedly denied treatment in a suburban hospital, as the parents wanted to pay in ₹ 500 notes, that had since become illegal currency.

Instances of chemists downing shutters, patients running from one chemist to another and hospitals turning away those who did not have the right currency notes, have surfaced from different parts of the country.

And this, despite the government's diktat that hospitals accept the old currency up to November 24th. With private and charitable trust-run hospitals not being included in this directive, the burdens of patients have only increased.

The day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made the announcement, Mumbai's Bhatia Hospital, the oldest charitable hospital in the city, wrote to the PM and others in the Finance Ministry urging that charitable hospitals be treated on par with government hospitals and pharmacies, allowing them to accept the old currencies.

Patients from remote areas who do not have credit/debit cards or cheque books are facing a huge problem, the hospital said, adding that its outpatient and day-care services had been hit by the sudden development.

Dr Rajeev Baudhankar, Bhatia Hospitals' Chief Executive, told *BusinessLine* that multiple communications on not allowing charitable hospitals to accept the old currency meant that they could transact only through cheques and online mode. "We have allowed people to be discharged on cheque payments, and refunds (if the hospital did not have currency) are also done through cheques," he says, adding that Bhatia had gone online in its payments to doctors, vendors, etc., about three years ago.

But, the hospital has already seen three cheques bouncing in one day, he says, urging people to see a hospitable as a "community asset" and not submit "dud" cheques. "This is our dilemma. Do we focus on giving healthcare services or chase people to get our money back when cheques bounce?" he asks.

Patient-families point out that while it is good that doctor payments are now made online, the problem comes when patients do not have cheque books or credit/debit cards.

In Hyderabad, which has a sizeable presence of corporate hospitals, on an average there has been a 40 per cent fall in outpatients in the past one week, says B Bhaskara Rao, President of the Private Hospitals Association.

Patients are suffering as most elective surgeries are postponed and only emergency surgeries are done. Representation to the State Health Minister elicited a response that it was the Centre which had to do the needful in this regard, he told *BusinessLine*.

There are over 25 big hospitals (more than 750-bedded) in the city. Bhaskara Rao, promoter of the KIMS Group, says: "We have started accepting cheques and card payments."

With healthcare shifting predominantly to the private sector, many poor patients are forced to look to State-run government schemes like Aarogyashri. Even here, paying for diagnostics/medicines and meeting dependants' expenses have emerged as major stumbling blocks.

K Hariprasad, President – Hospitals division of Apollo Group, said hospitals were accepting online payments, debit and credit cards and Net banking. Some hospitals are innovating by accepting post-dated cheques and giving concessions for payments within a defined number of days, said the executive of a top corporate hospital.

(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated November 19, 2016)

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