

I recently had a very educating experience with doctors. A friend's wife had complained of abdominal pain in the morning and he had taken her to the Super-specialty Hospital in Vasant Kunj. His experience at this state-of-art, Italian collaboration hospital was harrowing to say the least and in my opinion, tells us a lot about where our health system is heading.

The gastroenterologist after examining the patient had recommended some medicines and an ultrasound. She was admitted to the ICU and underwent all the tests which were basically normal. The doctor then told my friend that the pain will subside in a few hours and they will wait till the next morning to take a decision on whether an operation is needed.

In the evening however, the doctor informed him that his team was ready and they will need to operate immediately. This was all very confusing to my friend since nothing had changed since the last time he spoke with the doctor. The patient was still in some pain but nothing alarming. He asked the doctor who basically told him that he has to decide in 10 minutes about the operation since his team had been operating since morning and were tired! This shocked my friend but worst was still to come.

His wife told him that whenever she asked the doctors and the nurses to give her a painkiller, they refused! Instead, they kept on telling the patient to tell her husband that she should get operated upon! We decided to take the patient to another hospital where she was given some medication and she recovered.

The attitude of the doctor in this case, alarming and unethical as it is, is not a rare one. My mother who is an old fashioned gynecologist says how her peers routinely "advise" Caesarian Section even when a normal delivery is possible. Till recently, one thought that this situation prevailed only in the small towns - stories of doctors minting money by administering glucose drips and vitamin shots for all ailments in rural Punjab are of course well known. But now, this medical skullduggery seems to have reached the metros also.

There are several reasons for this change. Firstly, there is a proliferation of doctors in the urban areas. India is one of the very few (if not the only one) countries where we produce more doctors every year than nurses! The oversupply of doctors leads to a severe competition for customers, and that is exactly how patients are treated! A typical doctor spends almost 12 years before she is ready to practice-the longest for any profession. This just adds to the tendency to cut corners and make a quick buck. To make up for lost time I guess!

The other important reason seems to be the growth of medical insurance. Most of the private sector and public sector employees are covered with some kind of health scheme- either government or private. In this case, there is no incentive either for the patient or the doctor to minimize the investigations or procedures. This has the perverse effect of patients being treated like money making objects. In this, we seem to be heading in the direction of the U.S where by some reckoning, more than 40% of all medical procedures are totally unnecessary. The impact which this has on the health of the patients is obvious.

In my friend's wife's case, in all fairness, it is possible that the doctor misjudged the gravity of the ailment. It is also possible that he wanted to be safe and operate rather than wait for some other complications to develop. But this certainly does not explain the pressure which was brought to bear on the patient by the medical staff to go in for the operation immediately. And the refusal to treat the patient unless she agrees to the operation seems unethical, cruel and possibly illegal. If this is happening in the best hospitals in the city, one shudders to think of what the situation might be in smaller hospitals. No wonder, most people only go to a hospital when they feel it is unavoidable- else they are content either self medicating or taking medicines from a chemist.

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