Trouble at the Medical Council of India

The organisation regulating medical education in India is embroiled in controversy after its head was arrested for corrupt financial practices. Patralekha Chatterjee reports from New Delhi.

Last month, when India’s Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested Ketan Desai, the president of the Medical Council of India (MCI) and president-elect of the World Medical Association, for allegedly accepting a bribe of 20 million Indian rupees from the vice-president of a medical college and hospital in the Punjab state, few in the country’s medical community were surprised. Like the council he heads, Desai is no stranger to controversy.

In a country grappling with a glaring gap between the demand and supply of doctors, starting a medical college can be a profitable business. Tales of desperate students who have been unable to get into heavily subsidised government medical colleges shelling out huge sums for seats in private medical colleges, are routinely reported in the Indian media.

This supply deficit invests MCI with a lot more clout than was originally intended. Set up under the Indian Medical Council Act, 1933, MCI exists to ensure uniform standards in medical education and grant recognition to medical degrees awarded in India and abroad. Medical colleges across the country require MCI’s permission to add new courses and to increase student intake.

The charge against Desai and his associates is that they have been misusing these regulatory powers for personal gain. Back in February, 2000, a raid by the Income Tax Department on the business and residential premises of Desai yielded bank drafts worth 65 crores Indian rupees. The Delhi High Court ordered CBI to enquire further into the matter. But in 2005, CBI cleared him, citing lack of evidence.

Now Desai is under scrutiny once again. According to a CBI press release dated April 23, the agency had received “reliable information” to the effect that Desai had entered into a “conspiracy with a middleman and officials of the Patiala medical college for granting permission to admit students to different courses at the college from the academic year 2010–11, despite objections by an inspection committee”.

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“Once the investigation is complete, the charge sheet will be filed in court. Presently he is in judicial custody”, CBI spokesperson Harsh Bahal confirmed to The Lancet. The CBI website has invited the public to come forward with specific complaints about corrupt and unfair practices by MCI officials.

Many in the medical fraternity are demanding that Desai be ejected not only from MCI but also from other agencies with which he is affiliated. India’s health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad pleads he has no powers to remove the MCI chief. “Our first and immediate concern should be to restore the credibility of MCI, to enable the council to function in a fair and objective manner and to restore the confidence of all those involved in medical education in the country. I have referred this case to Law Ministry. Whatever the Law Ministry suggests, I will go with it”, Azad said, replying to a calling attention motion in Parliament on the functioning of the MCI.

Reports in the Indian media suggest that Azad has plans to limit the tenures of the heads of MCI, Dental Council of India, and similar organisations under the health ministry.

“Removing Desai alone is not going to bring the needed transformation. Another Desai is bound to creep up unless everyone involved in plundering Indian health care all these years are brought to justice. [The] Indian Government must learn from the health-care regulatory systems in the west. They must include non-doctor members in medical councils”, Kunal Saha, a physician originally from India, and now based in the USA tells The Lancet. The death of his wife Anuradha Saha in a Kolkata hospital due to medical negligence more than a decade ago spurred Saha to set up People for Better Treatment—a non-governmental organisation fighting corruption in the MCI.

“We don’t have much faith in the CBI investigations nor intervention by the government”, adds Arun Bal, a leading Mumbai surgeon and president of the Association for Consumer Action on Safety and Health. “On the cards is a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court (seeking Desai’s suspension and amendment to the MCI act to make it more transparent with change in election procedure). We also want representation for patients’ organisations in MCI...to make it more transparent”, says Bal.

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Medical colleges in India need the council’s permission to increase student intake