Physicians, Heal Thy System!

[The following are extracts from an open letter to the Indian Medical Association]

We are writing this letter in the context of the apology recently demanded by the Indian Medical Association (IMA) from actor Aamir Khan, regarding the episode on 27 May 2012 of his show Satyamev Jayate (SJ) dealing with certain practices of the medical profession.

We very much appreciate that the IMA wants to uphold the dignity of the medical profession. However, we feel that minimising the importance of the issues raised by this show and demanding an apology from Aamir Khan is definitely not the most appropriate way of upholding the dignity of doctors. Instead, the IMA should seriously try to reverse the current widespread unregulated commercialisation of healthcare in India, and should contribute to the process of health system reforms for eliminating the distortions in medical practice. Instead of “silencing the messenger”, we need to listen to the main message of this show and take steps to address the problems which are very real.

We would like to point out that the critical issues raised regarding “cut practice” and commissions, irrationality in investigations and surgical practices, the distorting influence of the pharma industry on prescribing by doctors, and consequent inflation of patient bills, are extremely widespread. This has resulted in massive problems related to both the cost and quality of medical care for the people. There is no point in dismissing these issues as just being related to a few “black sheep” in the profession. Besides the evidence from various studies on caesarean section rates, injection practices, prevalence of hysterectomies and sex-selective abortions, etc., most practising doctors admit in private that malpractices are a pervasive trend and not limited to a few isolated individuals.

Further and linked to this, we need to move from a market-centred model of healthcare towards a socialised system of universal healthcare (UHC).

The IMA office-bearers should treat this as a wake-up call for the medical profession as well as for wider society, and we should all start a process at two levels. We need to initiate social regulation of medical practice (which would include elements of self-regulation by the profession and active involvement of citizens, not just bureaucratic regulation) to ensure rational care and patients’ rights. Further and linked to this, we need to move from a market-centred model of healthcare towards a socialised system of universal healthcare (UHC).

We would suggest that the IMA should take this as a wake-up call for the medical profession as well as for wider society, and we should all start a process at two levels. We need to initiate social regulation of medical practice (which would include elements of self-regulation by the profession and active involvement of citizens, not just bureaucratic regulation) to ensure rational care and patients’ rights. Further and linked to this, we need to move from a market-centred model of healthcare towards a socialised system of universal healthcare (UHC).
and Scandinavian countries, as well as developing countries like Brazil and Thailand. Of course we will need to evolve a UHC model that is appropriate to Indian conditions which will require broad-based debate by and inputs from all stakeholders, especially from the medical profession. This process has already been initiated by the High Level Expert Group on Universal Health Coverage (HLEG-UHC). We may differ about the details and specifics of the model, but we need to accept that UHC is now emerging on the national agenda and we should all start engaging with this process.

Such a UHC system would eliminate widespread commercialisation, cut-throat competition and insecurity among the majority of doctors, while ensuring them a decent income and basic security. The price of not moving towards such a system is colossal, not only for patients from all classes of society, but also for the vast majority of doctors who would like to practise their profession nobly and rationally but are being sucked into a money-centred system which trumps humane principles and rational practices.

The potential rewards of such an alternative healthcare system would be enormous for our country of 1.2 billion, including our doctors who could once again become respected and honoured professionals, instead of presently being often viewed by people with suspicion and even resentment.

On the lines of the call for “Physician, heal thyself!”, the time has come to say – “Physicians, heal thy system!”

Executive Committee, Medico Friend Circle and Managing Committee, Forum for Medical Ethics Society

Murder of Qateel Siddiqui

It is extremely surprising that Qateel Siddiqui, one of the main suspects in the German Bakery case, was killed in the high security cell of Yerwada Jail. Qateel was under the custody of the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) since 3 May after being handed over by the Delhi Police. The Delhi Police Special Cell had arrested him on 22 November 2011. His remand was to get over the day he was found murdered in the jail. The police/jail administration have attributed his killing to some dispute with fellow inmates. Given that he was a high security prisoner accused and wanted in bomb blast cases, this story of his murder by two jail inmates seems highly implausible and fabricated.

That there have been and are many cases of Muslim youth being falsely framed in terrorist cases cannot be ignored, the latest case being of Fasih Mehmood whose whereabouts are not known since 13 May when he was allegedly taken away by Indian intelligence agencies in the presence of the Saudi police from his home in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The Maharashtra ATS is known for its notoriety in forging cases and implicating youth from the minority community. Qateel’s murder in custody raises many serious questions about the functioning of the ATS and the vulnerability of political prisoners in custody. In such cases, there is invariably a chain of long periods of detention without being charged which is allowed by laws like UAPA, of multiple cases and shifting remand from one police agency to another, the threat of violence within the jail (torture/violence by other inmates) becomes much greater for those accused of terrorist or unlawful activity. The chances of justice for them and for those implicated by their “confessions” are slim.

Qateel’s murder exemplifies this for no charge sheet was filed despite his being in police and judicial custody for more than seven months. It is now highly unlikely that Qateel’s side of the story will ever come out.

PUDR strongly condemns the murder of Qateel Siddiqui and demands the role of the Maharashtra ATS to be specifically probed in this regard. It is necessary to fix responsibility for this and other such acts and exemplary punishment be used as a deterrent to the lawlessness of law-enforcing agencies.

Paramjeet Singh, Preeti Chauhan (Secretaries) People’s Union for Democratic Rights

Understanding the Emerging Civil Society

In “Aesthetics of Civil Society” (EPW, 19 May 2012) Yoko Taguchi offers her commentary based on the “Fight the Filth” campaign in Mumbai. But the instances observed do not seem to be in line with the manifestations of civil society in India. There are many forms or patterns of expressions of civil society in present-day India that defy ideological packaging or historical consistency.

A situation would express only one or two dimensions of the problem in a democratic polity. Often, the focus of civil society activists would be limited to specifics such as building blocks. Others take care of other aspects. Diversity, contradictions, and variations are precisely the elements that necessitate dialogue and forging of a consensus. This process is universal. This is possible in India because there is no bulldozing by any prevalent political or social ideology.

The instances highlighted in the article do not escape from this logic. If the same campaign had been analysed from the angle of urban social psychology, it could have revealed more interesting transformations.

Rao V B J Chelikani HYDERABAD

Web Exclusives

The following articles have been uploaded since 25 May onto the Web Exclusives section of the EPW website. They have not been published in the print edition. Read them at http://epw.in

1. “Cartoons, Textbooks and Politics of Pedagogy” by G Arunima
2. “La vie en rose? François Hollande and the French” by Emile Chabal
3. “Bathani-Tola II – Miscarriage of Justice” by Dipankar Bhattacharya
4. “Religious Tolerance under Scrutiny in Sri Lanka” by Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri
5. “Price Stickiness and Exchange Rate Pass-Through” by Jyotirmay Bhattacharya
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