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Reproductive Technologies and the Private Sector: Implications for Women's Health

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New Scientific and Medical Techniques

The twentieth century has seen the introduction of a number of scientific and medical techniques to intervene and even alter the natural process of pregnancy and childbirth. These techniques include:

- A variety of contraceptive techniques to control fertility viz. the pill, intra-uterine device (IUDs).
- Management of labor and childbirth by applying technologies for controlling childbirth (both Instrumental and caesarian deliveries).
- Techniques like amniocentesis and ultrasound, which can probe into the genetic characteristics of the foetuses.
- Promotion of pregnancy through techniques for reversing fertility viz. In-vitro fertilization, test tube babies and artificial wombs.

These services are provided through a large network of government as well as private Medicare institutions. While there is considerable amount of information regarding the public sector, little is known about the involvement of the private sector in the provision of services relating to the reproductive aspects of women's health.

Private Sector and Reproductive Technologies

The Increasing presence of private Medicare institutions in both urban and rural areas of the country has evoked considerable debate, regarding the type of services they offer as well as their outreach. A few studies which have looked at the dynamics of the private sector in Medicare, point out that it is a heterogeneous structure comprising of institutions ranging from clinics managed by individual practitioners, both trained and untrained: small as well as large nursing homes: diagnostic centers and corporate hospitals. The clinics are manned by both qualified as well as unqualified individuals and have a wide outreach in both rural as well as urban areas. The nursing homes, which are of varying sizes, are essentially confined to cities and small towns across the country and offer outpatient as well as inpatient care. The diagnostic centers play a supportive role by providing support facilities ranging from simple routine tests to ultrasound as well as CAT scans.

A study of private nursing homes and hospitals in Hyderabad shows that 90 percent of them are managed by single owners or partners, mainly doctors, and all of them offer general and maternity services. These services include conducting deliveries; instrument aided (forceps) deliveries, caesarian sections, and family planning services. Family planning services include Insertion of IUDs. Performing abortions, tubectomies. A majority of the owners of these nursing homes in Hyderabad admitted that they also use hysterectomies as a method of family planning. Thus one finds that the major focus of services in these nursing homes is on pregnancy, childbirth and family planning, all of which directly deal with the reproductive aspects of women's health.

Scope for Profit

It is indeed interesting, that these nursing homes concentrate primarily on providing obstetrics and gynecological services for which there is considerable demand. At the same time the potential for making profits is unlimited. In the case of pregnancy, the use of ultrasound for testing, use of instruments and caesarians for conducting deliveries, all provide scope for tremendous profits. This is mainly because it is the doctor who decides about the number of tests required; whether a woman can have a normal delivery or needs a caesarian; how long she has to stay in hospital after the delivery. In such a situation, the woman who is hospitalized has little say in her treatment process. Similarly abortions is also another area where there are high profit returns and these services are being provided through both private nursing homes and clinics.

Ultrasound and Amniocentesis Testing

Majority of the nursing homes as well as corporate hospitals provides obstetric and gynecological services. Our survey of these institutions in Hyderabad showed that around 40 percent of them had ultrasound testing facilities. In addition, a fairly large number of diagnostic centers offer them as well. Even in the case of amniocentesis (which is a technique for testing the genetic abnormalities of the foetus) is being largely provided through private clinics and hospitals in different parts of the country. The outreach of these clinics is not restricted to urban and semi-urban areas, but in some parts of India it has managed to penetrate even rural areas.

Although ultrasound and amniocentesis testing are meant for testing genetic abnormalities in foetuses, in India it is being used to determine the sex of the unborn child and in most cases leads to the abortion of the female foetus. A survey of fifty private gynecologists in Bombay regarding the use of sex determination tests revealed that 84 percent of these doctors were performing sex determination tests. The outreach of these tests is not restricted only to the middle classes but also include women from the poorer classes. These clinics cash in on the vulnerability of women on the issue of dowry. Infact a clinic in Amritsar advertised amniocentesis for sex determination by stating 'pay Rs 500 now, rather than Rs 5000 later'. According to Kulkarni in Bombay, gynecologists have tried to convince people of all classes that spending Rs 70 or Rs 500 is a pittance as compared to the cost of bringing up a daughter and marrying her off. Some professionals look at sex determination tests and female foeticide as good methods of family planning. Dr. Sudha Limaye, Head of the Obstetric and Gynecology Deptt, Bokharo General Hospital in Bihar is reported to have said. "Our priority is population control by any means. Amniocentesis should be used as a method of family planning and be made available to everyone at a minimum cost or even free."

The trend observed in the prescribing of sex determination tests in Bombay has been observed in private nursing homes in Delhi as well. A preliminary survey of 40 nursing homes in this city revealed that 29 of the 40 (73%), had an ultrasound machine and of these 80 percent of them employed it for the purpose of sex determination. Even if private practitioners and nursing homes do not have facilities for ultrasound or amniocentesis testing, they refer patients to those private clinics, which have these technologies. There is a well-worked out circuit between private practitioners and diagnostic clinics. Majority of the owners of these clinics offers a commission of 10- 15 percent of the test cost to doctors who refer cases to them for testing. A routine ultrasound test costs between Rs 150-

300 and for each case that is referred, the doctor earns between Rs 15-30. As a result, a good deal of unnecessary testing is prescribed by gynecologists, which can have long term negative effects on women's health.

Treatment of Infertility and Promotion of In-Vitro Fertilization

Yet another upcoming area of concern in the private sector, is the promotion of hospitals and clinics for the treatment of infertility and promoting in-vitro fertilization. It is estimated that 10 percent of couples in the childbearing age are infertile and these clinics offer services to reverse infertility viz. in-vitro fertilization and test tube babies. In Hyderabad, there are two specialist nursing homes for the treatment of infertility and several such clinics have come up in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Delhi. It is important to realize that the treatment of infertility is an expensive and a prolonged process. Since there is a social stigma attached to infertility, very often these clinics 'cash' in on the vulnerability of their clients!

Family Planning Services

Private nursing homes and clinics are selective in the type of services they provide. Their focus is on the reproductive health of women and the various technologies that are related to it. This selective approach is determined by the dictates of 'profits' rather than 'needs'. In addition, the government's excessive emphasis on family planning has resulted in the involvement of private nursing homes in providing these services. The government offers a number of incentives both monetary as well as material to private nursing homes for conducting family planning services. Although there are certain basic conditions that are required to be met, a survey of private nursing homes in Hyderabad as well as a few southern States, revealed that nearly all nursing homes offer family planning services even if they are not equipped to do so. This raises an important question of the quality of services provided by these nursing homes. In Hyderabad, nearly 50 per cent of the nursing homes did not have the required infrastructure for conducting abortions and simple surgical procedures. However all of them claimed to be performing sterilization's, caesarians and even hysterectomies.

Regulation of the Private Sector

The absence of a proper system for registration of private institutions raises questions regarding quality of services provided by this sector. There is no check

on the type of services provided; the misuse of technologies; medicalisation of pregnancy and childbirth, etc. At a time when there is a move to cut back on public spending and a more prominent role for the private sector, questions regarding the role, regulation and quality of private services become crucial. For nearly two decades, various women's organizations have been voicing their concern about the introduction of various reproductive technologies, their commercialization as well as misuse. However, now the time has come when the role of the private sector, use of technology and quality of services provided by them, need to be addressed. The government and consumer groups, organizations dealing with health issues and professional bodies need to ensure that medical care does not become a tool for oppression and exploitation. This has serious implications for the consumer as well as the future of medical practice in this country.

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