Present scenario of Mental Hospitals in India

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At least 10 crore people suffer from mental illness in India. About one crore need hospitalization. There are just 43 government mental hospitals, most of them in a pitiable condition. There are only 4,000 psychiatrists in the country; 70% of them practice in private hospitals in urban areas. In 2008, according to National Human Rights Commission Report, a single psychiatrist was found manning the 331-bed hospital in Varanasi. Four years down the line, all that hospital has got is an additional psychiatrist.

There is shortage of paramedics too. Over 30% of posts of psychiatric nurses are lying vacant in most mental hospitals across the country. Besides there is shortage of Grade 4 staff, who are responsible for the day-to day care of the hospitals and patients. And at most of these hospitals, electroconvulsive therapy is still given without anesthesia, as there are no anesthetists available. Most of these hospitals are not managed by psychiatrists, so they do not understand the complexities of mental health care. In some hospitals there, physicians and gynecologists are in charge. These doctors do not understand the intricacies of a psychiatric illness and comprehensive care the patients require.

A lot of cosmetic measures have been taken in the past two years to improve the overall look of many mental hospitals, especially the front gate, compound wall etc. But the patients still live in inhuman conditions. Patients live in stinking barracks. The cells have no fans, even as the temperature scores over 40 degrees Celsius. Patients are forced to sleep on the dirty floor, as there are no beds in most wards. And thanks to strict adherence to old "jail manual", patients spend over 17 hours a day in the lock up, without any recreational facilities. Adding to that, the "jail" authorities thrash the patients if they demand basic facilities. No nurse, no clinical psychologists, no occupational therapist, and no social worker in majority of mental hospitals.

According to National Human Rights Commission, there are only 43 government mental hospitals in India, of which hardly half a dozen are in a "livable" condition. In fact the NHRC's reports in 1999 and 2011 look almost identical. Most hospitals lacked, and still lack, even clean water and ventilation. Many hospital buildings are in a dilapidated state, as they were colonial structures, mostly jails. It shows the government's attitude towards mental health care in the country.

Budget allocation

In 2010-11, the central budget allocation for the mental health problem was just Rs.103 cr-less than 1% of the total health expenditure. According to World health Organization, about 10% of any country's population suffers from some form of psychiatric disorder at any given time. And one in every four person suffers from some mental disorder at some point of time in life.

Even if we consider that a conservative 7% of India's population suffers from some mental disorder at a given time, it amounts to about 8 crore people. That means we have budget of Rs.13 per mentally ill patient per year, while at least Rs.500 per patient per month is required to provide at least the basic medicines, food and shelter. In our country mental health has not been a priority of the government. The district mental health programme, introduced in 1982, remained on paper till 1996, when the government finally launched it in 27 districts across the country with a budget of Rs.27 crores. Today the programme has managed to cover just 123 districts, with 40 percent posts lying vacant.

The problem is actually not shortage of funds, as there are times when the state returns the money, as they could not utilize it. There should be close monitoring of mental hospitals. But unfortunately, there is no man power even to do that. We do have a central mental health authority, but its members have not met for the past three years. The previous government of Kerala utilized only Rs.4.07 crore though the allotted amount was Rs.9.98 crores, in a state where the prevalence of mental disorders is almost three times the national average.

Fate versus faith

With the medical system in a mess and awareness about mental disorder is lacking, faith healers and quacks are making hay. A Survey in Jaipur shows that 78% of mentally ill people are taken to faith healers before a psychiatrist. The reason, beside the superstition, is that most general medicine doctors fail to diagnose psychiatric illness. Apparently psychiatry is not a separate subject in MBBS curriculum, and there are just 11-12 lectures on the stream. Moreover, there are hardly 250 postgraduate seats in psychiatry, and most of the pass outs opt for jobs abroad. In fact there are more Indian Psychiatrists in US and Australia than in India.

Many patients initially consult a general physician during the onset of mental disorder, and if that doctor fails to diagnose the problem correctly, generally the next option is faith healing. A mentally ill displays symptom which superstitious people believe is paranormal. Such patients are tortured, chained and used for extracting money from their families. In the case of disorders like hysterias, a patient has a tendency to do whatever is suggested. Faith healers take advantage of that. Their sidekicks keep performing certain actions in front of the patient, who is likely to imitate their actions.

Some others, especially schizophrenics, are treated cruelly. Some are whipped or caned, some are made to inhale smoke from burnt chili paste smeared into their eyes and some get branded with red hot coins. Despite laws banning the practice, many religious centers keep patients chained, some for life time. In 2001, a fire at Erwadi, in Tamil Nadu state charred to death 26 mental patients, who could not escape the blaze as they were chained.

Soon after the incident, the Supreme Court directed the Centre to conduct an all India survey to identify registered and unregistered asylums. The court also ordered that each state

government establish at least one mental hospital. But even today, states like Haryana still do not have a government mental hospital.

Dumping syndrome

Thanks to official sloth and societal apathy, families of mentally ill people are increasingly opting for the easy way out, "dumping". A recent shocker came from Trissur district of Kerala, where an illegal asylum was busted. Thirty five men and six boys from across India were rescued from inhuman conditions. Apparently it was the stench from their unwashed bodies and excreta that made neighbors alert the health department. As officials raided the asylum, they found naked and chained inmates, who had been dumped by their families after paying the asylum owner. Some were found crawling in their excreta, some even consuming it. Their bodies bore marks of torture and some had surgical scars on their backs, prompting allegations that the asylum had links with kidney thieves. Of 78 patients entered in the register, only 41 were found during the raid. Unfortunately the same phenomena is happening in most of the government mental hospitals where the relatives will disappear immediately after admission and will not return even to take the dead bodies of the these patients after the ultimate fate.

And even more shocking trend is of patients getting dumped in jungles, especially in the forest reserves of South India. Families mostly from North, pay lorry drivers to "drop" these hapless victims including children and women, in the forest ranges. Social activists in reserves such as Wayanad and Bandipur say drivers even rape the female before dumping them at the mercy of nature. Before we term the families as cruel, we must look at what forces them to take such extreme steps. What has clichéd Indian society: The system needs a holistic change.