

# HEALTHCARE CONUNDRUM



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**HEALTHCARE IN** India is a landscape of contradictions — of extremes. It offers the best juxtaposed with the pedestrian; the super-specialists with the quacks; products made of cutting-edge technology versus surgeries conducted under candle light... the list is exhaustive.

**As India strives** to provide world-class healthcare to its 125 billion people and become “the destination

for medical tourists” from around the world, a close look at the ground realities would be in order.

**1. Medical Technology Conundrum:** One of the recent raging controversies surrounds the government’s price control order on medical devices, chiefly stents used in heart surgeries. The government has set a cap on the price that hospitals can charge on stents, saying hospitals make a profit of up to 1,500 per cent on this life-saving apparatus. Stent-makers vehemently differ. They say they sink billions into research and development of products. Retailers say their cost of capital for holding stock continues to remain high and therefore, device-makers have withdrawn their products from the market, leaving patients at the mercy of smuggled stents, which come at a premium. Poor patients who can’t afford smuggled stents are left high and dry. Medical travellers are hardly amused by the controversy, leaving them looking to other countries for treatment. But this may turn out to be a ‘short-term’ conundrum, ultimately throwing a solution, which is in the best interest of the patients — the consumers!

**2. Medical Tourism Conundrum:** India is marketed as the destination for medical travellers from across the world; players cite the ‘world-class healthcare India provides at 1/10th the price in the US’? If the picture is so compelling, where is the story going sour? There are at least three obvious reasons:

a) The first is the ‘one-man army’ agents/touts. Their presence make the in-

dustry look absolutely unorganised. Worse, their practice of ‘hiding a lot of expenses/ cost of additional tests, etc., inflates patient costs, making ‘healthcare delivery decision making’ financially biased and unfair, thus skewing the scene against India. This has resulted in many incidents of ‘fleecing’, giving a bad name to the industry.

b) The second reason is the prevalence of ‘differential pricing’ for foreign patients. This is creating a lot of disgruntlement in the largest healthcare services import market for India — Africa, as African nationals end up paying through their nose. Naturally, the ‘India edge’ for these patients is drastically reduced.

**3. Modern Medicine vs. AYUSH Conundrum:** And the latest conundrum can be termed the ‘New Age Baba Saga’, where players like Patanjali and Gurus like Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravishankar are bearing a great impact on the government’s initiatives of bringing Yoga, Ayurveda and AYUSH to the forefront of the ‘medical practice’ in India. Even as the world swears by the R&D-based Western line of medication, and we Indians have also been tutored of the strong points of the ‘Modern System of Medicine — Allopathy’ for more than two centuries of British Raj, we are left feeling sandwiched and confused on ‘what ultimately is best for us all and up to what level’.

**Though** well-intentioned, the government’s initiatives need fine-tuning to make healthcare an organised, regulated industry in India. This will help make India the medical tourism capital of the world in its true sense, especially so when India is well-poised to achieve this goal. **BW**

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