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Govt to establish network of laboratories for epidemics and natural calamities

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The cabinet committee on economic affairs (CCEA) on June 28, 2013 approved the proposal of the department of h/ealth Research under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the setting up of 10 regional labs, 30 state level labs and 120 medical college level labs under the scheme for establishing a network of laboratories for managing epidemics and natural calamities.

The scheme is estimated to cost Rs 646.83 crore during the 12th Five Year Plan. The expenditure on the establishment of the labs at the State level and at medical colleges would be shared between the Central Government and State Governments in the ratio of 75:25 (90:10 in North-Eastern, Hill States, including Sikkim and Jammu and Kashmir). Expenditure on the regional labs would be fully borne by the Central Government.

This major initiative taken by the Government for establishment of a 3-tier network of laboratories across the country will greatly help in building capacity for handling viral diseases in terms of early and timely diagnosis, development of tools to predict viral disease outbreaks beforehand, continuous monitoring and surveillance of existing as well as new viral strains and handling viruses with a potential to be used as agents of bio-terrorism. The initiative shall also help in smooth data flow from across sites of epidemics, creation of efficient knowledge management network for policy interventions such as quick deployment of resources and measures like introduction of preventive strategies, new vaccines, etc.

Currently only national apex institutes like NCDC, New Delhi and NIV, Pune are mandated to undertake investigations. This leads to creating a heavy burden and affect their real referral role. The resultant delay in diagnosis/detection and inadequate/incomplete data during outbreaks significantly impacts on response time for interventions.

The regional labs will be equipped with state of the art BSL-3 facilities and the State level labs will have BSL-2 facilities. The lowest tier labs at medical colleges will be equipped with appropriate infrastructure to carry out serology for viruses (ELISA based diagnosis). In case of any outbreak / epidemic, these medical college level labs will carry out the initial diagnosis/ screening at the most peripheral areas nearest to the site of the outbreak. Each medical college lab will cover a cluster of three to four districts. While medical college labs will be expected to identify all listed common viruses, the viruses/agents which cannot be identified by these labs will be referred to the State/regional labs for identification and / or characterization.

All the laboratories will work under the overall guidance of apex institutions like NIV and NCDC through appropriate linkages and networking. The States/UTs which do not currently have any government medical colleges will be linked with the nearby State`s laboratories.