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Ã¢â?¬Å?India needs to show the way in TB eliminationÃ¢â?¬?

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Note:Â India is home to millions of tuberculosis (TB) patients and estimated 40 percent of Indian population is infected with TB bacteria (mostly latent).

Q: Have there been any major changes in the TB control programme in India in recent years?

There are some significant spectacular changes that happened in the meantime. There were lot of efforts by the leadership to keep the right policies in place. Among these were the major breakthroughs that TB was made notifiable, giving blood for diagnosis of TB and creation of electronic record systems for registration.

There was a steep increase in the number of multi-drug resistant (MDR)-TB cases detected and treated in India. It is one of the largest cohorts in India. However, the steps taken in last three years have been assuring. That is why we are energised. This is the reason we think that India is not just committed but also part of bigger elimination programme.

Q: What are your expectations from the health ministry's latest 'Call to action for TB control' initiative?

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This call to action for TB control is more of an advocacy programme. I have immediate expectations of increased levels of awareness from it. And it is good signal that the health minister is himself coming to such events and exhibiting enthusiasm. The participation of stakeholders is welcome and we have to go to another level. Health minister can do as much but we also require support from finance ministry and prime minister's office as well.

At ground level, what is required is the increase in level of awareness among both local people and healthcare workers. With huge TB burden, I say if India is moving then world is moving. Eyes are on India and it has to lead the way for others to follow and say if India can do, we can do too.

Q: Rolling out of such a huge programme requires finances? How do you plan to go about that?

There is a threat alive and there is a big opportunity too. The funding from national government and state governments is not that small. And national strategy plan here has a price tag attached to it. We require hundred thousand dollars but it didn't look like a scary figure to government which says it will do the needful. However, besides the government allocations, then you have the active global funds. There is a loan from World Bank but it is still the money. So I think the money per say is not a big issue but the system to make it work is the issue.

In terms of implementation, if things are in place, people will run with it. But to get to that level, there are various stops. One of thing is the funding available for molecular technology to change whatever is available now to develop options for future.

But the problem is that it takes months for moving. If we take the months of procurement and then deployment, there are discrepancies. This is the need for urgency, we are all talking about.

Q: What will be the role of Stop TB Partnership in these whole consortia?

We majorly play the role of high level advocacy. Based in Geneva, we travel frequently and work with partners here to interact with the prime minister's office and also the other higher offices. We work with those groups that already support the Indian TB programme. One is Global Poverty Action Fund (GPF) which is doing the full line procurements with external funding for second and third line of drugs. Besides that TB Reach which is funding the large scale innovation projects by identifying the right individuals and organizations.

We are developing the global plan to support BRICS countries where TB burden is 50 percent of global burden. India alone has a major part out of this burden and if it will drive the initiative along with China and South Africa, we can surely achieve great results.

Q: Does the TB elimination by 2019 look realistic? What according to you are the challenges that stand before us?

Well it looks possible given the enthusiasm but a lot of work has to be done in reality. I think that the real challenge is harmonization of treatment. From the WHO estimates, it appears that there is a certain burden and there are lot of people that are unaccounted for. Biggest challenge will be to ensure that the people wherever they go receive same treatment and quality as well. It is to make the private sector play the ball with public sector and we are here to ensure that. We would see to it that there is TB free India.

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