

Regulating medical education

The National Medical Commission (NMC) Bill, 2017, which seeks to regulate medical education and practice, and replace the Medical Council of India, ran into rough weather in January when the medical fraternity protested against it, terming the Bill as “anti-poor”. They also protested against the proposed “bridge course” in the Bill, which allows AYUSH practitioners to prescribe modern medicine, arguing that this provides opportunities for quacks.

Faced with these protests, the Lok Sabha referred the Bill to a Parliamentary Standing Committee in January.

The government considered the recommendations made by the Standing Committee, as well as the general feedback, and tabled its report in the House on March 20. On March 28, the Union Cabinet approved the amendments to the NMC Bill, which seeks to replace the Indian Medical Council Act of 1956.

The approved amendments include allowing for the final MBBS examination to be held as a common exam across the country. This way students will not be subjected to an additional licentiate exam for the purpose of obtaining a license to practice medicine. The MBBS exam will serve as an exit test to be called the National Exit Test. This test will also serve as the screening test for doctors with foreign medical qualifications who want to practice in India.

The Cabinet has also removed the bridge course provision. It has been left to the State governments to take necessary measures for addressing and promoting primary health care in rural areas.

The amendments also concern fee regulation. The maximum limit of 40% seats for which fee can be regulated in private medical institutions and deemed universities has been increased to 50% seats. Further, it has been clarified that the fee will also include all other charges taken by the colleges.

Responding to the demands from States to increase their representation in the NMC, the nominees of States and Union Territories in the NMC have been increased from three to six. The NMC will comprise 25 members, of which at least 21 will be doctors.

The amendments also introduce stringent punishment for unqualified medical practitioner, or quacks, including a provision for imprisonment of up to one year along with a fine extending up to 5 lakh.

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