

BACKING THE 'ANGELS IN WHITE COATS'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

A technician from Dr. Dangs Lab demonstrates before the media sample collection process for COVID-19 tests with the help of a dummy, in New Delhi. The Lab has initiated a drive-through COVID-19 testing facility while trying to ensure maximum safety and minimum exposure for the subject and health care staff during sample collection. | Photo Credit: [PTI](#)

On March 24, the Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown. Never since the Second World War have we seen the size, scale and human impact of this lockdown. Yet, we have managed and continue to manage the worst health and economic crisis we have seen in our lifetimes. Over 1,01,000 Indians have so far become infected by the novel coronavirus. We are not yet fully able to test and isolate efficiently, we are yet to find a protocol for cure and the vaccine is still in the distant future. Who will protect India?

While we are fighting for survival, the economic impact of this virus is \$8 trillion and growing as fast as the virus — which is why we need to desperately focus on a cure for the economy and a vaccine that protects the Indian healthcare system.

Indian hospitals and 60,000 nursing homes in the private sector have looked after 68% of Indian healthcare needs. In the process, they have evolved into delivering world-class care and continue to attract patients from 145 countries. Even more remarkably — we do it at 1/10th of international costs. Around 1.4 million Indian doctors across the world and even more nurses are leading the fight against COVID-19. While here in India, we clap for our heroes, should we not support the system that created and supports our 'angels in white coats'? The cost of good care, of commitment in the fight against a disease that has no tested clinical protocols calls for flexibility, resources and knowledge. The coronavirus is an imported virus and so are our PPEs, medicines and technology.

Till we have a strong Indian supply chain, we continue to import and use the best because every patient is worth it. The government, recognising the role of Indian doctors and frontline workers, has provided a Rs. 50 lakh insurance cover, which is welcome; yet private hospitals who charge 6% of that continue to be misunderstood.

As a sector that is definitely in need of support, we continue to look towards the government for help — 15,000 crore will never be enough to bring this sector, small, medium and large nursing homes and corporate hospitals, out of this epidemic. We might survive COVID-19 but we will lose our front line of defence unless we act now.

While we strongly welcome the set of measures announced by the government for healthcare — increasing the viability gap funding from 20% to 30%, setting up infectious disease rooms in every district hospital, setting up laboratory facilities at block level — much more needs to be done.

First, un-complicate our cost structure by zero-rating GST or exempt all services and goods that are supplied to the hospital. Today we have no input credit because we fall in the negative list. As positive contributors to the economy, we need to change this vital equation. Second, as the essential support system for COVID-19, hospitals need liquidity. Beyond bank borrowings, the government should set up a three-year fund that will enable sustainability of the sector and fortify the system from any such future outbreak and offer subvention of interest.

Third, incentivise rather than penalise the healthcare institutions that have invested in the future, in Tier II hospitals and technology by allowing companies to retain MAT credit as we continue to pay 25% corporate tax.

The government has done a commendable job in handling COVID-19. The statistics show that we are doing far better than even developed countries. This is the time for us to show that we are not here for just this fight alone — we are here for the future, a future where every Indian is unafraid because they are strong and protected by a vibrant healthcare system.

The crisis has underlined the need to nurture healthy individuals and maintain healthy balance sheets. It is with this hope that we will live another day. It is with this hope that we can exhale with confidence and courage, for there is no light brighter than this human spirit.

Suneeta Reddy is Managing Director, Apollo Hospitals

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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