

NEET will not help improve quality: AIIMS chief

Says institution not to adopt test, conducting it in a transparent manner would be difficult.

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Ramesh Chandra Deka.

“The Medical Council of India's decision to conduct a single National Eligibility and Entrance Test (NEET) for MBBS admissions at various government and private medical colleges across the country is quite unlikely to yield the desired results and improve the quality of medical education,” says Ramesh Chandra Deka, Director and Chief Executive Officer of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi.

Talking to *The Hindu* in Pathanamthitta recently, Prof. Deka said a single national-level common entrance examination for MBBS admissions was a lofty idea. However, the conduct of the examination in a transparent and foolproof manner would be a difficult task in a vast country like India.

The first NEET is expected to be held on May 13, 2012.

"Here, we do not have a common curriculum or uniform syllabus for higher secondary education. Different States follow their own syllabus and curriculum, and students can even opt for writing the examinations in their vernacular language," he said.

Prof. Deka said it was of the utmost importance to set certain standards for the qualifying examinations before introducing NEET. Introduction of a uniform higher secondary curriculum and syllabus across the country was a prime requisite before going for a national-level single entrance examination. Otherwise, it might lead to a denial of justice to the major chunk of children in rural India.

He said AIIMS had decided to opt out of NEET. The governments of Karnataka and Gujarat had stated that they would be opting out.

He said it was better the medical entrance examinations were conducted by the University Grants Commission or by the medical universities in various States in a foolproof and transparent manner to check the "assumed corruption" involved in the process. What was needed was decentralisation, instead of centralisation.

Let the private colleges form a confederation and conduct an entrance examinations of their own, giving topmost priority to transparency and quality assurance, under the strict supervision and guidance of the respective medical university, he suggested.

Moreover, the duty of the MCI is to ensure quality of medical education and proper infrastructure at various medical education institutes across the country and not conducting examinations, he added.

Prof. Deka said erosion of values and professional ethics was a major problem facing the health-care sector in the modern times. "We have to tackle this problem effectively by inculcating ethical values in the young minds well before they embark on their mission in pursuit of professional knowledge. Every MBBS student should compulsorily undergo a foundation course in ethics and social behaviour in the first year itself," he said.

The commercial culture in the corporate world should not be permitted to lure the young generation doctors away from their social and moral responsibility.

Prof. Deka said it was of much importance to expose medical students to the rural health-care sector from the first year of the MBBS course so that they could understand the actual health-care needs of the rural population in a better way.

A majority of the Indian population lived in rural reaches. The government should provide better facilities for education, transport, drinking water supply, power supply, health care, and other basic infrastructure in rural areas to attract more health-care personnel to these places.

He said the government move to appoint health-care practitioners in rural areas was a welcome move as doctors were not necessarily required for elementary health care in these areas. He said the advantages of modern technology, such as telemedicine, should be effectively utilised in the field of rural health care.

However, the AIIMS chief was not for making rural service mandatory for every medical graduate as he felt that imposing such things upon a professional would do more harm than good. Instead, the government should give incentives, promotions, bonus marks, and so on to those who came forward to work in rural areas, besides improving infrastructure in rural India.

Delivering the convocation address at the Pushpagiri Institute of Medical Sciences and Research in Thiruvalla on November 28, Prof. Deka said 70 per cent of India's population lived in rural areas. Access to health care for treating basic and primary diseases such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections was not available for a large section of the rural population.

However, Kerala, with its low infant and maternal mortality rates at par with many developed countries, had done better in the field of health care than various other States had.

Prof. Deka said the strength of a nation was judged from the education and health of its citizens. Education and health were complementary to each other and the quality of health-care system was an important parameter of progress.

He stressed the need to work for improving the health sector in terms of producing a competent workforce and delivering affordable and quality health care to all, besides taking measures to prevent and control diseases with a holistic approach.

Prof. Deka called upon the medical students to gain experience in providing quality and safe practice of medicine to the rural population.

“Our leaders are faced with the challenges to reconcile between poverty and plenty, development and corruption, tradition and modernism, and most important, the urban and rural divide,” he said. It is the responsibility of the medical professionals in the country to ensure that every Indian has access to primary health care, including safe conduct of delivery and care for women's health.