

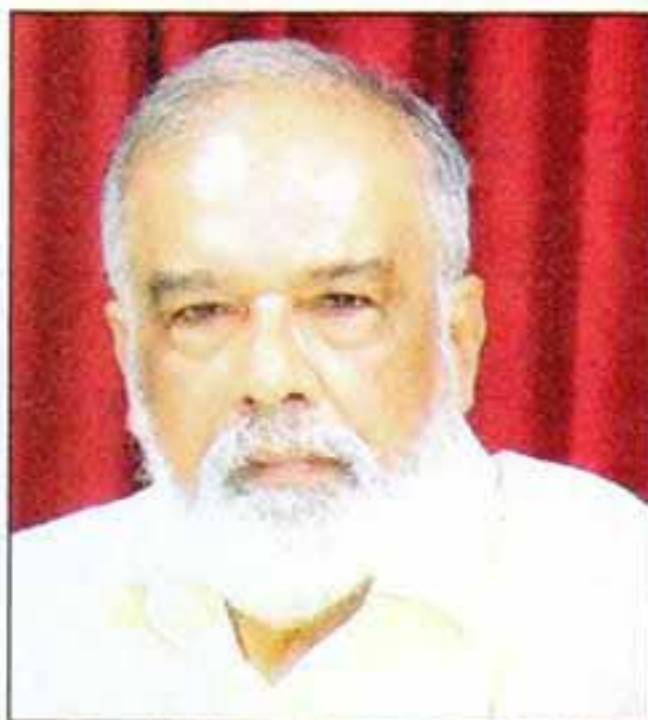
**A** COUNTRY IS only as good as the aggregate health of its people. When people are unable to attend work, their absenteeism creates a drag on the economy. It is thus logical that a nation should seek to mitigate this negative shock by ensuring that her citizens remain healthy. Healthcare is delivered to patients by trained professionals, but, it is also self-administered through one's own lifestyle choices. It is this self-administered healthcare, which falls under the ambit of preventive medicine that I wish to elucidate. This is particularly relevant in the Indian context as there is clearly an issue in respect of affordability that needs to be factored in.

The population can be broadly split into 3 main groups. First, you have the wealthy who are in a position of financial strength and are able to avail the very best healthcare the system affords. The second is the burgeoning, socially and economically mobile middle class who are able to avail some of the private healthcare provisions but, were a sudden catastrophic illness to befall a family member(s) they would find themselves in a financially compromised position. The last group are the less fortunate in society, without the means and access to even the most basic healthcare, including access to clean water, education, and basic hygiene.

The general discourse with respect to India's healthcare system within the global context, focuses on the premium service available only to the elite in the country, generally administered in the top private hospitals. However, this belies a worrying under-current of failings in respect of a number of key health indicators such as infant mortality rates, maternal mortality rates, etc. We have one of the highest incidence of death from malaria, multi drug resistant tuberculosis, and hepatitis. Worryingly, we seem to be importing first world diseases as we advance economically including higher incidence of heart diseases, stroke and cancer. As a medical professional it is my duty to articulate in a wholly objective manner, the inequity and deficiencies of the current system, as well as setting out alternative and preventive measures that we should all seek to inculcate in our own lives.

Before continuing it is worth pointing out what we do well as a nation. Private healthcare when correctly dispensed to those who

# To be HEALTHY and WEALTHY, be Wise



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are able to afford it, delivers standards of care that are comparable to the very best the world has to offer. The issues in the private sector are more around ethics and morality, whereby healthcare and profit conflict with one another, which at times can result in poor outcomes for patients.

The seminal message that I wish to get across is that healthcare is an eclectic human endeavour and we need to take preventive measures as much, if not more, than seeking clinical interventions. Fundamentally, there

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are two responsibilities that need to go hand in hand for the nation to become health-aware. First, structures need to be put in place which ensure the standard of healthcare administered by professionals has a baseline in terms of quality of care. This involves medical professionals, associations, colleges, and governments at both the state and national level. Investment in infrastructure, training, regulation, codes of practice, and policing of those practices are at the heart of this. As well, much more needs to be done in terms of raising awareness in respect of the dangers associated with food and lifestyle habits. Second, we need to take individual responsibility for the choices that we take in our own lives. We need to seek out information about healthy choices and be prepared to make changes where the direction of travel is clearly incorrect.

Recently, the government has made efforts to homogenise and simplify the taxation system by introducing the GST. Just as it is a good idea to have one country one tax, why can't we aspire to have standardised, uniform healthcare? Our stated objective at the outset is that we want a healthy nation. Increasingly, we import expensive (medical) technology from the west resulting in treatments only affordable by the rich in our country. The transfer of knowledge and technology across borders is a reality of the modern globalised world, not just in medicine, but across all aspects of life. In light of this fact, combined with the disparate socio-economic strata as eluded to above, it is absolutely vital that we try and tackle problems at source, by allocating resources to preventive measures, raising awareness, particularly in parts of the population who cannot afford to succumb to disease and illness.

It is very clear to me that mass media has a pivotal role in the efforts to disseminate information across the country. There are a number of recent examples, notably "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan", "Save Our Tigers", to name but a couple that have raised the profile on a number of issues. If the medical profession can partner with major media outlets and bring together both skill sets, to educate the masses then this synergy can be a powerful tool which will be of great social benefit.

We are the diabetes capital of the world. Heart problems are increasingly breaching the age threshold, now attacking younger peo-



ple. Fatty Liver issues are also on the rise at an alarming rate. Once considered a benign ailment, it is now being seen as a manifestation of metabolic syndrome, primarily a life style disease, which can adversely affect health, in some cases leading to the onset of cancer. As we have prospered and grown as a nation, we have adopted increasingly sedentary lifestyles. On the one hand we have significantly reduced the amount of daily physical exercise undertaken, and on the other, we have adopted unhealthy eating habits choosing convenience food which tends to be processed, high in sugar, salt and saturated fats. Take the case of carbonated drinks which should come with the same kind of statutory warnings as cigarette packets, because of the huge amount of sugar that they contain. Obesity, particularly childhood obesity is a modern day affliction, which is a conse-

## WE CAN PLAY A ROLE IN PREVENTING DISEASES AND, THEREBY, SPARE FAMILIES OF PATIENTS EMOTIONAL, FINANCIAL TURMOIL

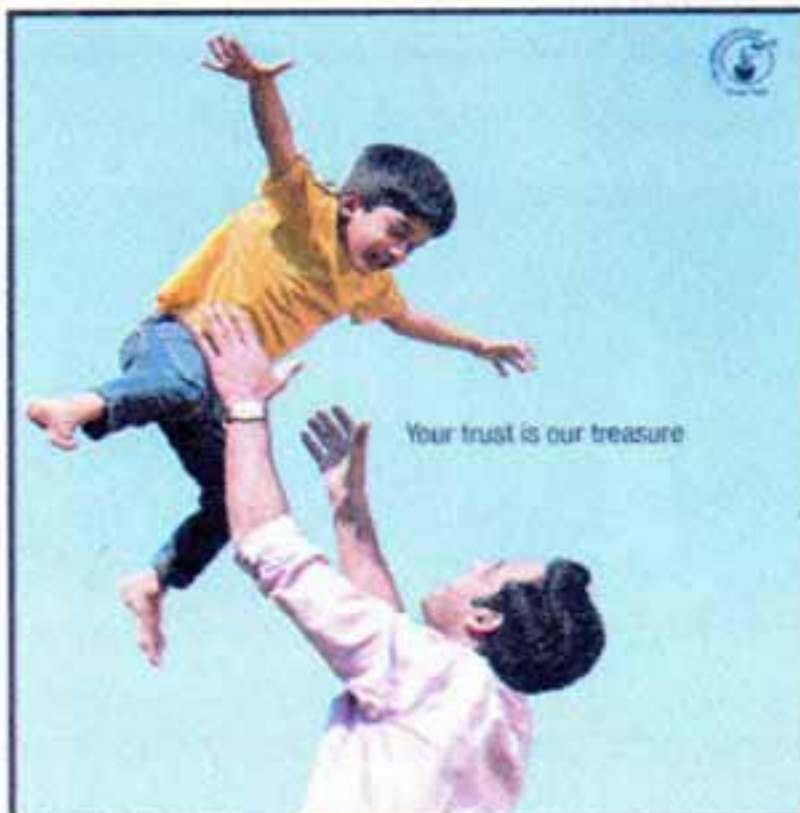
quence of the increased sugar and processed food intake. Furthermore, obesity is an independent risk factor for cancer, which is often glossed over. What I want to impress upon you in the strongest possible terms is that many cancers are preventable, for example lung cancer through cessation of smoking, liver cancer through immunisation of hepatitis B and minimising alcohol consumption. To-

day, our girls are getting sexually active at a young age and may have multiple partners. When one becomes sexually active, especially with multiple partners, they are prone to contracting the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which can lead to cervical cancer. Again, this too is now preventable and vaccines are available, but sadly the awareness is amiss. Across all of the issues raised above being able to partner with the media in order to bring to people's attention the choices that they have is a powerful and invaluable public service.

The reality is that a large section of the population relies on private healthcare, which comes at a cost. The saddest thing as a medical professional, is to not be able to care for your patient. If the cause for the withdrawal of treatment is a lack of resource, it feels as though the injustice is amplified. This is often a reality for many patients, who have to abort treatment and are financially crippled with debts. This has repercussions on family structures and mental health, over and above the impact on physical well-being. If we can play a role in preventing the onset of diseases thereby, ensuring that families need not be subjected to this financial and emotional turmoil, I believe it is a cause worth fighting for. And finally, a word about stress.

This is a subject, often neglected and not deemed worthy of much attention. Increasingly, mental health is occupying as much importance as physical health in the mainstream medical discourse.

Swami Vivekananda in his famous speech delivered in Chicago mentioned that, India's contribution to the world was spirituality. It is this spirituality that we must incorporate in our daily lives if we are to remain healthy in both body and mind ■



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