

DOWN TO EARTH

Deplorable Aspects of Medical Practice

By A S M Nurunabi

Many patients in the city, as in other urban areas, are victims of physician's self-referral. Sending patients to facilities in which the doctor has a financial interest. In recent years, self-referral has spread quietly into many areas of medicare, including physical therapy and rehabilitation. X-rays, laboratory testing, etc.

Self-referral operates on a simple principle: The more patients doctors refer, the more money they make. The practice has made many physicians rich, while potentially undercutting patient-doctor trust. Although most doctors do not participate in self-referral deals, no one knows for sure exactly how many do. It is difficult to uncover all the doctors who invest in joint ventures because they try to hide it.

It is a fair guess that, across the country, many of our independent clinical labs and physiological labs are owned wholly or partly by referring physicians. Many doctors justify self-referral by saying it helps assure quality care. In the opinion of independent observers, that is just not true.

It has been observed that self-referral entrepreneurs usually offer limited partnerships in joint-ventures — so-called, because many doctors have ownership shares. In many cases, doctors are asked for a minimal investment. The amount the doctor invests may be ridiculously small because owners do not want the doctor's money. They want his patients. Owners choose physicians selectively, concentrating on specialities guaranteed

to produce a high volume of patient referrals. The more patients a doctor has, the more desirable he or she is for self-referral.

Self-referral mostly preys on patients stricken with a serious illness, people, who trust in their doctors to make decisions for them. Many doctors choose to wear ethical blinders. Money, of course, is the obvious reason. The money is not earned from any service performed by these doctors. It is just a kickback for referring patients.

Apparently, public health is chronically underfunded, so much so that they are short of drugs and equipment. According to the experience of some patients, some do not even have the blood-pressure metering machine or surgical thread for stitching up cuts and gashes.

Public health seems to have collapsed. The private sector is taking over. Here also the picture is dismal. It is alleged that these private hospitals, with a few exceptions, tend to fleece their patients and yet do not have their own surgeons and doctors or even the necessary equipment. The sinister aspect is that the government hospitals are used by their government appointed doctors as patient recruiting centres for the private hospitals. This has led an observer to comment that this, after lack of professionalism has, more than any other drawback, including the absence of even basic medical equipment, been contributing to the undoing of the main body of our collective medical enterprise.

Even to casual observer, the condition of government hospitals in the city will seem appalling. These hospitals are the

victims of three maladies: The ineptitude and apathy of the authorities, overloading by patients and widespread corruption.

Viewing the situation, one observer commented that the nation's health authorities have seemingly abandoned all thoughts of ever salvaging these hospitals from their present chaotic condition. It may not be far from the truth to say that people often come out of these hospitals more ill than when in.

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US-Bangladesh trade show begins today

By Staff Correspondent

The third annual US-Bangladesh Trade Show will open at the winter park of the Hotel Sheraton in the city today.

The three-day show, organised by the America-Bangladesh Economic Forum, will be inaugurated at 10 in the morning by Industries Minister AM Zahruddin Khan.

Companies offering products and services in computers and telecommunications, food and beverages, transportation, financial and engineering consultancy, banking, insurance, textile machinery, and air-conditioning will participate in the show.

The representing American companies include the Caterpillar Inc, American Life Insurance Company, ITT Sheraton, Dell Computer, 3M Company, GEC, Coca Cola, Kelvinator, Apple Computer, Singer, American Airlines, IBM World Trade Corporation NY, United Perceal Service, Hewlett Packard Inc, Motorola Communication Inc.

40 troops killed in ROK plane crash

A South Korean military transport plane, with between 30 and 40 troops aboard, crashed into a hillside in Boun county in the central province of North Chungchong, reports said. There was no immediate news in casualties or survivors in the crash, which occurred some 100 kilometers south of Seoul. Youhan news agency said, reports AFP.

US cold wave toll 130

WASHINGTON, Jan 21: The cold wave gripping central and eastern United States has killed at least 130 people, according to a new official toll released today, reports AFP.

Most of the victims in the week-old bitter cold front died in traffic accidents on icy roads. Several had heart attacks or froze to death.

Temperatures of minus 27 degrees Celsius were registered early today in Albany, New York, and Indianapolis, Indiana.

Weather forecasters said slowly rising temperatures would bring some relief over the weekend.

Steps taken to manufacture paper, pulp-making machinery

Steps have been taken to manufacture paper and pulp-making machinery, for the first time, in the country, reports UNB.

Under a memorandum signed yesterday, Khujina Shipyard and Chittagong Dry dock — two enterprises of the Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation (BSEC) — will fabricate globe digesters for production of pulp from green jute at the Karnaphuli Paper Mills and North Bengal Paper Mills.

The fabrication of the pulp and paper digesters will open a new vista in attaining technological self-reliance of Bangladesh, BCIC sources said.

Chairman of Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation Waseq al Azad and BSEC Chairman A I M Nazmul Alam signed the memorandum of understanding on behalf of the respective corporations at a simple ceremony at the BCIC Bhaban.

Industries Minister A M Zahiruddin Khan and Industries Secretary A H M Abdul Hye were present.

BCIC Chairman also handed over a cheque of one crore Taka to the BSEC Chairman as advance payment on account of the price of the digesters.

Experts now feel that if the trend in commitment and disbursement continues at the same pace under the changed scenario, the country has to be more and more self-reliant in the future to keep economic growth moving. They believe that foreign aid will be more and more difficult to get and, therefore, the private sector must show a good performance to push up the GDP.

The donors are now putting in a lot of efforts to marshal their resources in developing the former communist bloc which has emerged from a repressive economy and has been heading towards an open economy.

"One way to sustain the flow of foreign assistance at the existing level is to make ourselfs perform better," a high-placed Economic Relations Division (ERD) official said. "Although 22 per cent is a good rate, yet we have to remain competitive in the global foreign aid scenario to push up the donors."

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