

# Health sector review 2004

By Waqar Gillani

**LAHORE:** Punjab's hospitals were mostly unfriendly to patients because of poor management by the government attention and Board of Managements (BoMs). The previous year witnessed the approval of university status for King Edward Medical College (KEMC), the start of the Punjab Emergency Ambulance Service and its help line 1122, the unification of the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA). The University of Health Sciences failed to make the academic and examination system of its medical colleges homogenous.

The government failed to stop public sector doctors practising privately. It also could not start a regular service structure for doctors despite the chief minister's promises. The following were the major developments in the health sector:

**Contractual appointments:** Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, the Punjab chief minister, announced the abolishment of the doctors contractual employment system in July but his promise is yet to be fulfilled. The Punjab health minister claimed to implement the new regular service structure system within the next 20 days of Elahi's announcement, which are yet to come. Meanwhile, the PMA has been protesting against the contractual service structure, which is also opposed by the Punjab Public Service Commission.

**Private Practice:** The government announced in 2003 that it

would not ban private practices by public sector doctors. The implementation of an earlier ban by Dr Mahmood Ahmad Chaudhry, the interim health minister, failed because of fierce opposition. The government relaxed the ban and institutionalised private practice within hospitals by introducing outdoor-patient evening shifts, but the ban has completely failed as senior doctors and professors are still not available during the evening shift. The government has said that it is impossible to stop doctors from practising privately and there was no point of a ban unless other professionals such as engineers and teachers were also stopped.

However, the government extended the ban's deadline till December 31 at the request of various doctors and ordered all medical colleges to provide emergency services to allow in-house private practice. The government's latest policy on private practice is a surprise, since earlier announcements were touting the introduction of a legislation to regulate private laboratories and hospitals.

**KEMC university status:** On July 23, Elahi announced university status for KEMC. KEMC has over 40 departments with 140 senior teachers. KEMC's elevation makes redundant UHS Ordinance 2002.

**PMA unification:** The four PMA factions unified after a period of eight years citing 'the betterment of the medical community'. The PMA had split into PMA-Dr Yasmin Rashid Group, PMA-Dr Saeed Elahi Group,

PMA-Dr Tanveer Zubari Group and PMA-Dr Haq Nawaz Group. The internal rift occurred over the ownership and occupation of PMA Trade Centre (PMA House) on Ferozpur Road. The uniting factions signed a code of conduct vowing to make PMA House a trust, withdraw cases against each other and hold joint elections in April 2005.

**UHS fails in uniformity:** UHS was unable to introduce a uniform annual examination system for MBBS and BDS courses. UHS announced, without any notification, a 'tentative' change in its examination schedule, which was sent to its affiliated colleges. UHS said that uniformity in the examination system was not possible this year.

Meanwhile, people protested against the flaws in the UHS examination system throughout the year. UHS announced friendly relations with the Lahore Medical and Dental College.

**Unprecedented favour to UHS:** The government, after a lot of pressure from Dr Mahmood Ahmad Chaudhry, the UHS chairman board of governors, entitled UHS to 5.5 percent of the annual tuition fees of its affiliated medical colleges.

The UHS claimed that President General Pervez Musharraf, who is the UHS's patron-in-chief, approved the move. The UHS had earlier wanted 10 percent annual fees from affiliated colleges. Several colleges asked the government to notify the UHS that their demand for a share of annual fees was illegal otherwise.

Two private medical colleges, the

Lahore Medical and Dental College (LMDC) and Fatima Memorial Hospital College for Medicine and Dentistry (FMHCMD) in Lahore; three public self-finance colleges, the Services Institute of Medical Sciences (SIMS) in Lahore, Sialkot Medical College (SMC), and Sheikh Zayed Medical College in Rahim Yar Khan and five public colleges are currently registered with the UHS.

**No policy for private colleges:** The Punjab Health Department failed to finalise rules governing the establishment of private medical colleges. The lack of rules resulted in the mushrooming of various 'illegal' private medical colleges. Since August 1999, 26 private colleges have opened or are planning to open without the government's permission.

The Lahore High Court had directed the government in 2002 to formulate a clear policy governing the registration of medical colleges in Punjab. The fate of students in illegal colleges is still hanging.

**Dangerous, fake, illegal dugs:** A number of medical and drug stores were selling banned medicines, like Vioxx, which was withdrawn by its manufacturer on September 30 because of its severe side effects.

The federal, provincial and local governments are still silent about the matter and have not taken any measures to withdraw the banned medicines from the markets. Government drugs inspectors have not informed drug store owners about banned medicines. The stores continue

# Pollen prevarications

Despite popular belief, the paper mulberry tree is not the 'only' source of asthmatic allergy in Islamabad

## Cutting edge

I Hassan



It is extraordinary how monumentally ignorant our people are. For months, nay years, it is being claimed that asthmatic allergy is caused in Islamabad by the pollen from the paper mulberry tree. The Capital Development Authority itself proclaims this and is busy cutting down these trees. Their espousing this canard can be understandable because cutting down these trees and selling them as firewood can fetch them a pretty penny.

Each time this canard is aired, I have written that it is not 'only' the pollen of the paper mulberry pollen that causes asthmatic allergy, but a myriad of causes and agents. Each individual is affected by different causative agents.

First of all, our people have to be educated in the reproductive processes. Like human beings or all living beings, plants too have male and female components. Whether it is grass or trees, they all produce pollen which when resting on the stigma of a plant produces a progeny in the shape of a seed which when planted, produces the same plant yet again.

In the cycle of germination and eventual death every plant produces flowers, generally at springtime. The flower has both pollen and stigma. The most pollen is produced by grass. Both rice and wheat are grass. If we start to uproot all trees then we must cut down every plant, whether grass, weed or whatever you have. Then we shall be left with a bare planet with nothing to eat. We shall at least have eradicated allergic asthma! We

shall also have eradicated all living beings.

Having written about this many times before, I would not have crossed swords with the most erudite of people who claim that paper mulberry causes allergy had it not been for *The News*, which came out in its editorial with the same canard. The only way I can persuade the editorial staff of *The News* that paper mulberry pollen does not cause asthmatic allergy is to offer a prize of Rs 100,000 to whoever can prove that the only source of asthmatic allergy is mulberry pollen. For this, a panel of physicians, maybe three, perhaps specialists, could be asked to give their verdict. Among other things, they will tell you that asthmatic allergy can be canard by various types of dust, fur, soot and a thousand other agents. The only way to find out what is affecting a particular individual is to test out every possible agent against the individual. It is a long and tedious process and experiment, and even at the end of the day, it may still not be possible to determine what causes the allergy in that particular individual.

For a panel of three physicians, it is would be advisable to consult someone like the present or former dean of medicine of the Quaid-i-Azam University as the chairman and two other specialists of equal standing - maybe Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians anywhere in the UK. I will pay the sum of Rs 100,000 to whoever establishes that asthmatic allergy is caused by the pollen of paper mulberry 'only', unless this assertion is supported by a ruling of the three physicians.

It is unfortunate that even some physicians have got on the bandwagon. Seeing how many people suffer from this allergy in Islamabad, one or two physicians have begun to advertise them-

selves as anti-allergy experts. As there is hardly any remedy against such an allergy, the sufferers flock to these so-called healers in droves. They are minting money. Others, seeing how successful these charlatans are, have started to advertise themselves as expert dentists, skin specialists with laser treatment and much else.

Since most people do not know that for such professional people or physicians, dentists and other medical practitioners, it is unethical to advertise, one cannot do more than condemn such practitioners. Any practitioner who advertises must be shunned. By doing so, if the practitioner gets no patients and thus starves, so much better for all concerned.

Another thing, many people are hollering against the paper mulberry tree and shouting in the middle of January when it is bitterly cold, claiming that people in Islamabad are getting "pollen allergy". They seem to be unaware that pollen can only spread if trees and plants have begun to regenerate and flower. Since it is the middle of the coldest weather and trees and plants are still dormant, how pollen and particularly that of the mulberry trees has come to be spread, defies all understanding of botany or life or regeneration.

It is best, therefore, for all to learn how plants grow and how in the process of regeneration they cast pollen, which is produced by every living plant. Above all, people must learn that just one type of pollen alone is not the causative agent of allergy. Having learnt that, please spare the full-grown trees of Islamabad, the only source of beauty in this city.

**The writer is a former broadcaster, commentator, foreign correspondent and a freelance columnist**