**The medical mafia**

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The hallmark of our society is the presence of a host of mafias which have cropped up as a result of wrong and unimaginative policies of successive governments. These mafias are so well-entrenched and strong that the government seems helpless before them. The cost of this inaction by the government is that the poor masses are suffering for no fault of theirs and their cries and screams either do not reach the ears of the rulers.
Apart from the sugar and flour scandals, the medical mafia, which owes its creation to the decision to allow the private sector to set up hospitals and clinics, is fleecing the public like anything. The case in point is the birth of a child. Due to the scant number of government hospitals, the inadequacy of the required paraphernalia there and the extinction of the culture of midwifery, people are constrained to go to these private clinics and hospitals to consult the gynaecologists. These hospitals and clinics have gynaecologists and surgeons on their panel who are not their employees but are available to assist in the birth of a child. In fact, most of the birth cases are brought in by the gynaecologists who run their own clinics and are also on the visiting panels of a number of hospitals.
The modus operandi of many gynaecologists is that they ask the pregnant woman to visit them bi-weekly during pregnancy and invariably prescribe different tests which are either performed in their own pathological labs or referred to other labs with which they have the arrangement. Each visit to a gynaecologist costs between 4-5 thousand rupees, including the consultation fee of the doctor and laboratory tests. When the birth time arrives, these gynaecologists take the pregnant women to the hospital with which they have the arrangement. Till the time the woman is taken into the labour room, the impression given is that it is going to be a normal delivery. But after they take the woman to the labour room, the concerned gynaecologist comes out to inform the husband or the relative accompanying her to the hospital that due to some complications developed suddenly, the women will have to go through Caesarean procedure and if it is not done immediately there is a danger to the life of the child.
The poor fellows are also told to deposit between eighty thousand to hundred thousand rupees with the cashier of the hospital and show the receipt to the doctor so that the procedure is carried out. So from the time of starting consultations with the gynaecologist till the time of delivery through Caesarean procedure, a childbirth costs around two hundred thousand rupees to the family.
According to medical science, Caesarean birth is required when there are real complications or if a woman already had a Caesarean procedure and the next child could not be delivered through normal birth. But these hospitals and clinics have ended the culture of normal births altogether. Almost all children making entry in this world in these hospitals are Caesareans, which involves a surgical procedure through incisions in the abdomen and uterus. Apart from the exorbitant cost of birth, it also leaves life-long scars on the women. If this practice continues unchecked, I am afraid our future generations will all be Caesareans with almost all women bearing the shock of scars on their bodies.
My motivation to write on this subject stems from an incident in a private hospital where I had gone to see a patient. As I passed the operation theatre I noticed a woman sitting on a bench and crying. I could not help asking her the cause of her agony. She told me that she had brought her daughter-in-law for the birth of the child. The gynaecologist whom they have been consulting during pregnancy never hinted at the possibility of a Caesarean birth. Even before taking the woman in, they were telling her that it was going to be a normal birth. However, within five minutes the doctor came out to tell her that normal delivery was not possible due to some complications and they will have to operate on the women. They also asked her to immediately deposit a hefty amount with the hospital authorities.
The woman started crying because she did not have the money that they asked for. I felt sorry for her and decided to help her by talking to the administrator of the hospital. He remained unmoved by my pleadings and said he could not help it. I told him that the woman was ready to give an undertaking to the hospital to pay the amount later on. He reluctantly agreed, saying that the hospital would not release the child until the money was paid. The woman in the meantime went to a goldsmith shop nearby and sold her earrings. But even that was not enough to cover the cost. It was half of it. The woman gave a written undertaking to pay the rest of the amount as desired by the hospital.
It was really shocking for me to see that happening and I decided to invite the attention of the media as well as the government to this alarming situation. In my view, what is happening in these hospitals is a white-collar crime against the nation. For millions of years, women have given normal births assisted by midwives in their localities with very little cost. What has gone wrong? The answer is simple. Some hospitals and clinics are commercial ventures and have nothing to do with humanitarian considerations. When the governments abandon their responsibilities towards the citizens, such crimes are bound to happen. Here I would also like to point out that once I also had the opportunity to visit the Gynaecology department of CMH Rawalpindi and saw a notice which stated that they encourage normal births.
I am not in any way suggesting the closure of private hospitals or clinics, but want their activities monitored and regularised. My suggestion is that these hospitals and clinics may be bound by law to encourage normal births and perform the Caesarean procedure only when there is a real complication, endorsed and authorised by a panel of doctors other than the concerned gynaecologist. They should also be asked to submit a monthly report to the government health authorities regarding births in their hospitals. That will lower the cost of birth and also save the women from being disfigured due to the greed and lust for money.
However, the preferred suggestion is that the capacity of the existing government hospitals to handle normal births may be enhanced and the establishment of birth centres at a number of places in the cities and rural areas, manned by trained midwives supervised by a specialist gynaecologist may be set up. Only in a case involving complications, the Caesarean procedure be carried out. I have opened the subject for a debate in the hope that some people might come up with more suggestions in this regard. The government needs to be shaken out of its slumber in this regard.