

Book Reviews

Peter Berman and M. E. Khan. *Paying for India's Health Care.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1993. 326 pp. Hardbound. Indian Rs 295.00.

Health care systems in both developing and developed countries are in a state of crisis. The burden of providing medical care for those who require it is stretching government budgets. To reduce the pressure on the budgets, alternative measures, e.g., the introduction of a user fee, have been taken so that the responsibility of financing health care is shared by all. The use of such fees has become common practice even in developing countries like India, where socialised medicine has formed a major plank of social development.

This crisis in the financing of health care systems has resulted in the publication of numerous articles and books describing the problems and suggesting the methods for their solution, as well as experimenting with novel ways to provide the finances needed for an efficient health care system. Thus, this book has been published at a very opportune time.

The book consists of original articles discussing various aspects of the Indian health care system, with a particular emphasis on health financing. The articles discuss public health expenditures at the national and state levels; the development and operation of the government and private hospitals; health insurance; the private health sector; health expenditures by households and the financing and efficiency of national nutrition programmes. In addition, there is an article which compares health policy and financing between India and Pakistan.

Although India falls in the category of the poorer countries in the world, if we consider national income as the prime economic indicator, its expenditure on health (both by the government as well as the private sector) is quite high: total health expenditure is around 5½ percent of national income. In comparison, Pakistan's expenditure is barely 1 percent of national income. Even Korea and Malaysia, which are much more developed than India, spend less on health. Korean expenditure is just over 5 percent of national income, and Malaysian expenditure about 3½ percent of national income.

The relatively high levels of expenditure on health in India have led to the creation of a vast infrastructure in the health sector, for which continued high levels of financing are necessary if the efficacy of the system is not only to be maintained but also improved.

The articles in this book can be compartmentalised into three sections. The first section, which consists of three articles, examines the issues and outcomes of health financing in India. In particular, the issues examined deal with operational and allocative efficiency. Resources need not only be allocated efficiently, but their utilisation in an operational sense is also important. Related to this is the question of the viability and sustainability of the health financing programmes.

The second section of the book consists of six articles which offer a detailed examination of the various sectors which constitute the Indian health system. More specifically, the article by Rao, Khan, and Prashad, entitled "The Planning Process and Government Health Expenditure Patterns in India in the Early 1980", clears the misconceptions about government spending which have arisen from carrying out a selective examination of the public sector accounts. Other articles in this second section of the book look at the effect that public spending has had on the family welfare programmes, the efficacy of public nutrition programmes, and the private health care sector in India. The final article in this section compares the development of health policy and financing in Pakistan with that of India.

The four articles that make up the third section deal with the operational level of health services. In particular, the article by Priti Dave may be highlighted as an important contribution. The article discusses community- and self-financing in voluntary health programmes. The involvement of the community on a voluntary basis, if successful, can help reduce the burden on the government in providing health care. Resources thus saved can then be utilised elsewhere in the system.

This book is a timely and useful contribution to the literature on health financing particularly in developing countries. Its major contribution, however, lies in the fact of bringing together material, and making it available a wider audience, that until now had only a limited circulation—limited to specific government departments and international aid agencies. The improved understanding of health planning and financing in India is aided by the clarity of exposition in these articles. A judicious use of data has been made to illustrate the points. This is particularly so in the article comparing expenditures on the health sector in Pakistan and India.

To conclude, the work presented in this volume can be used as a basis for further research in the health sector. It is also to be recommended as priority reading for our own personnel who are responsible for health planning and policy.

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