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'Medical tourism' policy gets flak

By Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Jan 19: A research by a non-government organisation has taken strong exception to the country's medical tourism initiative which, it says, is nothing more than a label for protecting and promoting trade of human organs.

"The country has nothing to offer the world but cheap kidneys in the name of medical tourism," observes the report which was released by "The Network for Consumer Protection" here on Friday.

It criticises the recent policy of the federal government to promote medical tourism, waiving duties and taxes on import of certain machinery and medicines for the cause of the tourism industry.

It explains that medical tourism means travelling to some country for treatment which costs less than the charges in one's own country.

"Pakistan neither has world-class health facilities nor does it have a developed infrastructure for tourism. The country's tourism industry has been in crisis since the 9/11," says the report which adds that its healthcare infrastructure too is in appalling condition. Pakistan spends only 0.5 per cent of the GDP on health and a considerable portion of the population is deprived of the basic health facilities, it points out.

The situation makes Pakistan a totally unattractive destination for medical tourists. However, kidney transplantation seems to

be the only attraction for them, according to the researchers.

Introduced in the mid-1980s in the country, more than 2,000 transplants are undertaken each year according to an estimate.

According to Dr Farhat Moazzam of Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture, Pakistan is rapidly establishing itself as an international leader in this practice. She says in 1991, around 75 per cent of kidneys transplanted in Pakistan were donated by family members to their relatives.

In contrast, by 2003, 80 per cent of all transplanted kidneys in the country were being obtained from unrelated donors. "Over half of the 2,023 transplantations performed in 2003 were undertaken on citizens of other countries, especially those from the Middle East," the report indicates.

In addition, more than 1,400 of all transplants were performed in private hospitals in Punjab, especially those located in Lahore and Rawalpindi. This burgeoning transplant tourism is no secret as the healthcare community and the government are well aware of the names of physicians and institutions involved in this practice. Those who are in the dark have only to go to the Internet to view "transplant packages" being offered in newspapers around the world by hospitals located in the private sector in Punjab", the report quotes Dr Moazzam as saying.

Newspapers have carried in

the recent past multiple stories about destitute individuals from villages in Punjab who have sold their kidneys to hospitals. Most of these 'donors' are brick kiln workers, caught in a vicious web of loans of the kiln owners. They are often bonded labourers and put their body parts for sale to meet some urgent needs like marriage of sister or daughter or medical treatment of some severely-ill family member.

Besides such donors driven by poverty, there are complaints of kidney thefts in hospitals. A few months back a case in Peshawar was highlighted in the press in which a surgeon was charged with depriving a child of his kidney.

According to it, the World Health Assembly in 1991 had endorsed several "guiding principles" (Resolution WHA 44.25) which all member states (including Pakistan) are expected to follow in formulating policies on organ transplantation. One of the principles states that "the human body and its parts cannot be the subject of commercial transactions," and that "advertising the need for or availability of organs with a view to seeking payment should be prohibited."

In the last few years, almost all countries have complied with and formulated laws that criminalise organ trade. But Pakistan stands as the only Muslim country that has failed to pass an organ and tissue transplant law as well as the one dealing with brain death, it regrets.