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Drugs too expensive to be afforded by psychic patients: report

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ISLAMABAD: Highlighting the negligence of those in authority, TheNetwork, a non-governmental organisation working for consumer rights, has pointed out in its latest consumer report that the drug manufacturing companies are introducing expensive drugs for the people suffering from psychological and mental disorders, to the agony of patients especially those with limited resources.

In its report - New Alluring Business of Psychotropic Drugs, TheNetwork says the absence of effective rules and regulations on the sale and use of such drugs and qualified psychiatrists have worsened the situation.

At the same time, the NGO says it seems as if big multinational companies have selected Pakistan as a favourite spot for treating the patients having mental and psychic problems through such expensive drugs.

The NGO put the annual sale of psychotropic drugs (allopathic only) in Pakistan at Rs 3 billion. "For only one year (July 2003 to June 2004) the sales stood at Rs 2.76 billion (US\$46.77 million). Of these, antidepressants sales were worth Rs 821.17 million (US\$13.4 million) (an increase of 23 percent from the previous year), tranquillisers and hypnotics Rs 1.36 billion (US\$23.18 million) (an increase of 18 percent and 137 percent respectively from the previous year) and antipsychotic Rs 377.02 million (US\$6.39 million)."

"Interestingly, sales of drugs categorised as 'nootropics' (so-called brain stimulants) were worth Rs 187.6 million (US\$3.18 million). To put the above figures in context, the Gross Domestic Product of Pakistan is approximately US\$61.6 billion whereas the per capita income is US\$440.

"There are only 150-200 qualified psychiatrists and people go to the general practitioners for the treatment of mental and psychic diseases. However, such drugs are sold even without pre-

scriptions. The poor patients who could not afford doctors' fee or purchase of expensive drugs are pushed to rely on quackery," the report says.

Pakistan's population of 150 million makes it the world's sixth most populous country. Community-based prevalence studies for common mental disorders give high figures: 25-66 percent women and 10-40 percent men. There are an estimated 3 million drug addicts in Pakistan.

Suicide rate has increased dramatically from a few hundred people to more than 3000 annually in the last few years. Serious mental illnesses account for another 1-3 percent of the population. Health spending is pitifully 1 percent of the government's annual budget and mental health does not even have a separate budget.

There is no health insurance and a poorly funded public health service is accessed by only the poorest. All healthcare costs are borne by patients themselves. Mental health services are almost nonexistent and limited to either psychiatry

departments of teaching hospitals or privately run clinics.

There are only 150-200 qualified psychiatrists in Pakistan, an alarming ratio of one psychiatrist to a million people. The majority of psychiatrists are urban-based, whereas 70 percent of the population is rural-based. Except in a few instances, psychiatry is neither taught nor examined at undergraduate level, leaving most practicing physicians with poor diagnostic and management skills for psychiatric disorders.

The Report says that a multinational pharmaceutical company recently launched a drug for dementia in Pakistan and flew about 70 Pakistani doctors to Bangkok, Thailand for a 3-night all-expenses-paid trip. "Pakistani doctors were part of a larger group that also included doctors from other countries. A conservative estimate of costs for the Pakistani doctors alone is about 7 million Pakistani rupees (US\$ 120,000)," report claimed.

"Other methods include funding a physician's

family wedding, holidays and other events of this nature. One of the latest incentives is for the pharmaceutical company to provide the physician with a down payment for a new car.

All the physician has to do in return is write 200 prescriptions for the company's expensive drug," report says.

The Report questions that can the murky waters be cleansed, boundaries redrawn and integrity regained by psychiatrists in developing countries such as Pakistan?

It suggests that anything that compromises lucrative offers must be identified and eliminated that includes accepting any kind of inducement - large or small, in any form, shape or size - from pharmaceutical companies.

"Alternative ways of funding attendance at conferences must be found. This must be strengthened by strong institutional policies limiting direct contact with pharmaceutical sales representatives," it says.



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