

JP Nadda as the new Union Health Minister, takes charge of key ongoing initiatives

Under the new Cabinet portfolios announced in June 2024, BJP President, JP Nadda has been given charge of the Union Health and the Chemicals and Fertilizers Ministries. An experienced politician, he has been the Health Minister in the first term of the NDA Government in 2014. Along with him, Ms Anupriya Patel and Mr Prataprao Ganpatrao Jadhav also took oath as Ministers of State, Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Mr Nadda has the daunting task of steering some of the key health initiatives launched in the last years and also bringing in newer reforms in the sector. Some key concerns that need his attention on priority are shortage of hospital beds and specialists, disparities in rural and urban healthcare access, improved regulation of drugs and medicines, enhancing the pharmaceutical and diagnostic industry, improving working facilities for healthcare workers, speedrolling digital health adoption among healthcare service providers, rationalization of GST in healthcare services, lowering custom duty on imported medical equipment, among others.

During the month, soon after taking over, Mr Nadda chaired a meeting to discuss the new Government's 100-day agenda for the healthcare sector. The agenda includes extension of AB-PMJAY to citizens 70 years and above, rollout of the U-WIN portal, initiatives to address NCDs, targeted campaigns towards youth on tobacco control, and addressing health emergency response action, among other issues. Additionally, the government launched the National Health Claims Exchange to expedite health insurance claims processing and explored the use of drone services for delivering medical supplies to remote areas. Cashless treatment services for ex-servicemen and initiatives to enhance ease of doing business in select food sectors under the FSSAI were also part of the plan. These initiatives are aimed to improve healthcare accessibility, efficiency, and coverage across the country as part of the Government's immediate priorities.





Global patient safety report 2024

WHO Releases Global Patient Safety Report 2024

The World Health Organization (WHO) has released the Global Patient Safety Report 2024, offering the first comprehensive global analysis of patient safety and highlighting areas for improvement. Since the adoption of the Global Patient Safety Action Plan (GPSAP) 2021–2030, there has been progress in implementing safety policies and interventions, although advancement in some core indicators remains limited.

The report reveals that only about one-third of countries have national action plans for patient safety, despite its global priority status. Nonetheless, over 70% of countries have made significant strides in establishing national programs for health worker safety. Access to medical records is crucial for patient safety, with 80% of countries having procedures in place. However, funding and patient engagement are concerning areas, with only 11% of countries allocating sufficient financial resources and just 13% involving patient representatives in hospital governance.

In 2023, World Patient Safety Day emphasized patient and family engagement, yet this remains underemphasized globally. Dr. Rudi Eggers of WHO highlights the critical need for concerted efforts to protect patients from harm, as unsafe care affects millions annually.

The report, the first on GPSAP's implementation, assesses over 100 Member States against seven strategic objectives, including policy development, clinical process safety, and health worker education. It serves as a crucial resource for policymakers and healthcare stakeholders, aiming to enhance patient safety through targeted interventions and stronger health systems.



Education Ministry launches campaign for Tobacco-free educational institutions

On 24th June 2024, the Ministry of Education launched a nationwide campaign on Tobacco-Free Educational Institutions (ToFEI) as part of the National Tobacco Control Programme (NTCP). India, the second largest consumer and producer of tobacco globally, faces nearly 1.35 million preventable deaths annually due to tobacco use. The campaign aimed to address this issue, particularly among youth, as highlighted by the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) 2019, which found that 8.5% of school students aged 13 to 15 consumed tobacco in various forms.

In response, the Ministry issued guidelines and developed a ToFEI implementation manual for schools, launched on World No Tobacco Day, 31st May 2024. The campaign's objective is to ensure educational institutions nationwide complied with ToFEI guidelines and became #TobaccoFreeAreas.

The Secretary of the Department of School Education & Literacy issued a detailed advisory to all States/UTs, outlining suggested activities, including displaying "Tobacco Free Area" signage, ensuring no evidence of tobacco use on school premises, organizing biannual tobacco control activities, and nominating 'Tobacco Monitors.' Schools were also advised to include "No Tobacco Use" guidelines in their codes of conduct and ensure nearby shops did not sell tobacco products within 100 yards of school boundaries. The NTCP, launched in 2007-08, aimed to accelerate tobacco control efforts through implementing tobacco control laws (COTPA-2003), school awareness programs, and providing support for quitting at Tobacco Cessation Centres.



Health Ministry issues new hospital referral guidelines

The Union Health Ministry issued comprehensive interdepartmental referral guidelines on 7th June 2024 to address inconsistencies and improve accountability in hospital referral processes. These guidelines aimed to enhance communication and cooperation within hospitals, emphasizing prompt initiation of referrals when patients required specialized care or diagnostic evaluations beyond the admitting department's scope.

Key directives included that consultants must write referrals for specialist opinions, and junior residents were prohibited from closing referrals independently without consulting their seniors. The guidelines stressed the importance of consultant review of the previous day's referrals to optimize patient care and resident education. Acknowledging common challenges such as communication breakdowns and delays, the guidelines advocated for standardized protocols, streamlined workflows, and training for healthcare professionals involved in referrals. They recommended preparing rosters of departmental officers for efficient communication, ensuring comprehensive documentation of referrals, and prioritizing patient-centered care throughout the process.

The guidelines also highlight the need for follow-up on referrals, coordination of care transitions, and seeking feedback for continuous improvement. They cautioned against unnecessary delays, inadequate clinical information, and assumptions about referral urgency, aiming to mitigate risks and optimize patient outcomes.



Rare Disease Patients Urge Health Ministry for resource support and policy Action

Recently, rare disease patients and their caregivers have written to the Union Minister for Health, Shri J.P. Nadda at the Health Ministry, expressing gratitude for the advancements made during the previous term, especially on the introduction of the National Policy for Rare Diseases 2021. However, in their representation, they highlighted critical gaps in policy's implementation.

Patients, mostly children suffering from chronic rare genetic disorders like Lysosomal Storage Disorders (LSDs), face uncertainty due to unsustainable funding and delays in fund utilization. They emphasized the need for Centres of Excellence (CoEs) to expedite access to life-saving treatments.

Key recommendations include establishing sustainable funding, ensuring continuous support for all ultra-rare diseases with approved therapies, and addressing the current one-time budgetary provision of up to Rs 50 lakh, which is insufficient. They also called for equal treatment of all notified conditions under the policy, as diseases like Pompe, Fabry, and MPS I and II are still not prioritized at CoEs, delaying treatments and endangering lives. Additionally, they urged for improved accountability and efficiency in fund utilization by CoEs, as many have not effectively used the allocated funds. They appealed to the new health minister to prioritize rare disease issues in the 100-day action plan, highlighting the urgency and importance of supporting this often-neglected community to improve their lives significantly.

Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute organizes Breast Cancer Conference 2024

The Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute and Research Centre (RGCIRC) hosted the “Breast Cancer Update Conference 2024” on June 15 and 16, gathering leading experts, researchers, healthcare professionals, and faculty from India and abroad. The conference focused on the latest breakthroughs in breast cancer research, featuring insights from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO), and San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium (SABCS).

Under the leadership of Chairman Rakesh Chopra, the event included expert-led sessions on emerging therapies, precision medicine, and patient-centered care. Interactive workshops and panel discussions raised collaboration and knowledge exchange on topics such as early-stage and metastatic breast cancer, triple-negative breast cancer, and advanced treatment options like immunotherapy and precision medicine.

Renowned oncologists presented significant findings from recent studies and trials on targeted therapies, immunotherapy (including Pembrolizumab), cyclin inhibitors, new drugs, surgical procedures, radiation techniques, and investigations that have revolutionized breast cancer management. These presentations offered valuable insights into innovative treatments and patient care strategies.

Interactive panel discussions provided a platform for top oncologists, researchers, and clinicians to exchange ideas and experiences. Critical subjects discussed included high-risk and metastatic breast cancer, as well as the evolving role of immunotherapy in treatment protocols





Health Minister Nadda issues directions on elevating the standards of medicines and medical devices

Shri Jagat Prakash Nadda, the Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, chaired a review meeting on 15th June 2024 in New Delhi, directing the Department of Pharmaceuticals to elevate the standards of all drug and medical device manufacturing plants to global benchmarks within three years. This directive came during a comprehensive discussion held shortly after assuming office, where Nadda, accompanied by Anupriya Patel, MoS Chemicals and Fertilisers, scrutinized the department's operations.

The meeting included presentations outlining the pharmaceutical and medical technology sectors, regulatory frameworks, and ongoing schemes. Nadda stressed alignment with the Prime Minister's vision for a developed India by 2047 and evaluated both a five-year agenda and a 100-day action plan. The five-year strategy prioritized bolstering drug security, fostering self-reliance in medical devices, expanding the Jan Aushadhi Scheme, and ensuring affordable healthcare for all.

Report by HEI: Air pollution caused 8.1 million global deaths in 2021, 2.1 million in India

In 2021, air pollution emerged as a critical global health issue, contributing to 8.1 million deaths worldwide, according to a report released by the Health Effects Institute (HEI) in collaboration with UNICEF. India and China reported the highest fatalities, with 2.1 million and 2.3 million deaths respectively linked to air pollution. Specifically, in India, 1,69,400 children under the age of five succumbed to its effects, highlighting the severe impact on young populations. Other heavily affected countries included Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, each experiencing significant child mortality due to air pollution.

The report identified PM2.5 (fine particulate matter) as the primary culprit, responsible for more than 90% of air pollution-related deaths globally. These microscopic particles lodge deep in the lungs and bloodstream, increasing the risk of diseases such as heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and respiratory conditions. South Asia, particularly affected, faced air pollution as the leading risk factor for mortality, surpassing risks posed by high blood pressure, diet, and tobacco.

HEI emphasized the urgent need for global action to improve air quality, stressing that addressing air pollution could lead to substantial public health benefits worldwide. The report highlighted the importance of integrating air quality considerations into health policies and disease prevention strategies to mitigate its devastating impact.



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