

medico friend circle

The National Office bearers,
HQ Indian Medical Association
New Delhi

June 12, 2012

Dear IMA office bearers,

We are writing this letter in context of the apology recently demanded by IMA from actor Aamir Khan, regarding the episode on 27 May 2012 of his show 'Satyamev Jayate' (SJ) dealing with certain practices of the medical profession. We write to you as members of Medico Friend Circle (MFC, www.mfcindia.org) and Forum for Medical Ethics Society (FMES). MFC is a nation-wide, 39 year old platform of pro-people doctors and health professionals, scientists and social activists, involved in improving health care, especially for the deprived sections of people. FMES is an association of doctors and health professionals which has been actively campaigning for reform in the healthcare system and medical education, and has been publishing the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics since 1995.

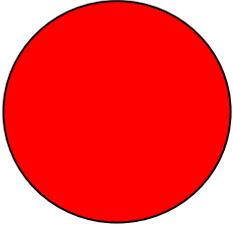
We very much appreciate that you want to uphold the dignity of the medical profession. However we feel that denying or minimising the importance of the issues raised by this show and demanding an apology from Aamir Khan is definitely not the most appropriate way of upholding the dignity of doctors. Instead, IMA should seriously try to reverse the current widespread unregulated commercialisation of health care in India, and should contribute to the process of health system reforms for eliminating the distortions in medical practice. This would be immensely beneficial to patients and would also raise the dignity of the medical profession manifold. Instead of 'silencing the messenger', we need to listen to the main message of this show and take steps to address problems which are very real.

We would not go into the details of the content and form of this show. We would rather point out that the critical issues raised regarding cut practice and commissions, irrationality in investigations and surgical practices, distorting influence of pharma industry on prescribing by doctors, and inflation of patient bills consequent to all of these, are extremely widespread. This has resulted in massive problems related to both cost and quality of medical care for the people. There is no point in dismissing these issues as just being related to a few 'black sheep' in the profession. Besides the evidence from various studies on cesarean section rates, injection practices, prevalence of hysterectomies and sex selective abortions etc., most practising doctors admit in private that malpractices are a pervasive trend and not limited to a few isolated individuals. In fact ***distortions in medical practice induced by unregulated commercialisation have become systemic problems.***

Given this reality, let us move beyond the 'few rotten eggs' type of defensive arguments focused on individuals, and look at the systemic problems which include-

- Astronomically high 'donations' charged by mushrooming capitation fee medical colleges is a major influence which is pushing crass commercialisation of medical practice, besides placing medical education beyond the reach of many deserving poor and middle class students.
- Widespread cut practice, intense competition and defensive medicine are causing dissatisfaction among many doctors, not only their patients.
- Pressures are imposed on doctors by hospitals, inducing them to advise more than necessary investigations, procedures, intensive care admissions, hospital stays.
- There are continuous tensions between doctors and patients over payment issues, and even occasional outbreaks of violence against hospitals.

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These are serious problems going beyond just a few individuals, which are a product of the increasingly commercialised, market oriented nature of medical care in India today.

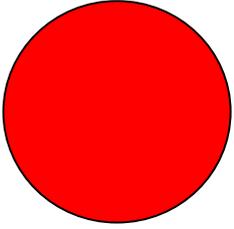
As good physicians, if we go beyond just addressing the ‘symptoms’ and make a ‘comprehensive diagnosis’, it will be obvious that ***all these disturbing features are due to a system of unregulated commercialisation of medical care***, which has emerged over the last few decades. Instead of being foremost healers and protectors of their patients’ health, doctors are increasingly forced to become hard-nosed businessmen, often in order to repay large scale loans, to ensure their practice, and to remain ‘in the system’ despite the fact that many would not have liked to depart from their principles. In this situation, the increasing numbers of ‘black sheep’ - and much larger numbers of ‘grey sheep’- are the inevitable products of this system. Of course there is a role for individual responsibility, but such an entrenched system cannot be changed just by giving moral lectures to individual doctors, by asking them to follow rational principles in isolation. Instead of this, large numbers of discontented individuals, ***doctors as well as ordinary citizens, need to come together and start changing this system through a large scale social process.***

Of course, commercialisation and linked distortions are seen in all professions. But doctors’ organizations are best placed to reform the medical profession and health care sector, thereby contributing to wider social reform. In fact IMA’s stated objectives include “improvement of Public Health and Medical Education in India”. Hence we would suggest that instead of rubbishing the SJ episode and ignoring its main message, IMA should treat this as a ‘wake-up call’ for the medical profession as well as for wider society, and we should all start a process at two levels. We need to initiate ***social regulation of medical practice*** (which would include elements of self-regulation by the profession and active involvement of citizens, not just bureaucratic regulation) to ensure rational care and patients rights. Further linked to this, we need to move from a market-centred model of health care, towards a ***socialised system of universal health care.***

This letter will not go into details of how such social regulation of medical practice and further, a system for universal health care (UHC) might be developed in India, which could ensure decent and secure livelihood for all doctors (though not super-profits for any!) and access to good quality, free health care for all residents of the country. IMA office bearers would be aware of UHC systems which are successfully working in a wide diversity of contexts: developed countries like Canada, Australia and Scandinavian countries, as well as developing countries like Brazil and Thailand. Of course we will need to evolve a UHC model that is appropriate to Indian conditions which will require broad based debate and inputs from all stakeholders, especially from the medical profession. This process has already been initiated by the High Level Expert Group on Universal Health Coverage (HLEG-UHC) appointed by the Planning Commission, which has published a detailed report which would be taken into account while developing the upcoming 12th Five year plan. We may differ of the details and specifics of the model, but we need to accept that Universal Health Care is now emerging on the national agenda, and we should all start engaging with this process.

Such a UHC system would eliminate widespread commercialisation, cut-throat competition and insecurity among the majority of doctors, while ensuring them a decent income and basic security. The price of not moving towards such a system is colossal, not only for patients from all classes of society, but also for the vast majority of doctors who would like to practice their profession nobly and rationally, but are being sucked into a money-centred system which trumps humane principles and rational practices. The potential rewards of such an alternative health care system would be similarly enormous for our entire country of

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1.2 billion people, including our doctors who could once again become respected and honored professionals, instead of presently being often viewed by people with suspicion and even resentment.

In short, the time has come to do some genuine introspection and alternative thinking, and to address the widespread problems instead of denying them. On the lines of the call for 'Physician, heal thyself!', the time has come to say – 'Physicians, heal thy system!'

Yours Sincerely,

Executive Committee, Medico Friend Circle
Managing Committee, Forum for Medical Ethics Society