

### July 1 is National Doctors' Day: How to regain the lost public trust in healthcare?

Sir,

The National Doctors' Day is celebrated to recognize and appreciate the contributions health care professionals make to enhance the lives of individuals as well as communities. The date varies from country to country. In India, it is celebrated on July 1 and honors Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, West Bengal's second chief minister and a legendary physician. Dr. Roy was born on July 1, 1882 and passed away 80 years later on the same date. He was honored with Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award in India, on February 4, 1961.<sup>[1]</sup>

Ophthalmology (like any other branch of medicine) has progressed enormously since the time of Dr. B. C. Roy. A career as an eye doctor is considered extremely rewarding as ophthalmology offers the joy and excitement associated with performing delicate sight restoring surgeries, yet the ophthalmologist does not deal with stressful life-and-death systemic situations. Thus, technologically medicine has rapidly progressed and surgical results today are very good.

However, in today's world, sadly, doctors do not hold the same respect as they did during the time of Dr. B. C. Roy and there is a steadily declining mutual trust and erosion of the sanctity of doctor-patient relationship. While patients often complain that doctors are proud, indifferent, do not give them expected care, charge hefty fees, are dominating, and confuse them with medical jargon; doctors are also bitter about the increasingly aggressive attitude of patients who do not respect doctors or their work, blame doctors for suboptimal outcome, and indulge in litigation, without understanding the disease and its consequences. This scenario is not good for the society as hospitals are supposed to be safe havens for the treatment and care of the sick, and we cannot afford to let them turn into battlegrounds. While decline in trust and values is a global phenomenon and affects all spheres of life, and the capitalist mindset and corruption have also affected the medical profession, we should not generalize these negative qualities. A majority of doctors sacrifice their sleep and family life every day to care for the sick at odd hours. For every case of alleged medical negligence, there are thousands of cases each day, where the doctors have gone beyond their comfort zones to help save many lives. Doctors also need to adjust to the heightened patient expectation in a changing society and make every effort to improve communication with the patients and their families.

Also worth serious concern is the fact that recently there has been a decline in the number of medical aspirants and many of the academically brilliant students have little inclination to join the medical field due to long and arduous training and disproportionately less rewards even after the grueling 10-15 year long training period. Other professions are more lucrative in comparison and less stressful.

Celebrating the National Doctors' Day is a way of emphasizing the importance of doctors and other health

care providers in the society and appreciates them for the hard work they put in to protect health. Although only 2% of India's annual budget is dedicated to health, our nation has showcased outstanding improvements in the health care sector due to the significant contribution of private doctors and health institutes. The public health care sector in India is facing numerous challenges at present due to the shortage of health providers and poor infrastructure. There is a growing trend of violence against doctors for alleged negligence. Unethical practices by some health care professionals have resulted in a considerable loss of patient-doctor trust.<sup>[2]</sup> Although this day is about highlighting the efforts health care professionals put to enhance the health of overall society, this is also a time to reflect on the falling trust of patients on doctors, the unethical practices, and determine ways to improve the situation.

Loss of doctor-patient faith has led to patients being confused about which health care provider to go to, and then end up "shopping around" for doctors with the hope of finding an ethical and a sincere doctor. Unfortunately, this practice increases their chances of making the wrong decision, which delays and also affects the quality of treatment. Such mistrust towards health care providers and unethical medical practices have become prevalent in other countries as well. Various studies on health care in different countries have also reported a lack of empathy which has also contributed towards this loss of faith.<sup>[3]</sup> It has been reported that more importance is given to the physical health of the patients instead of their psychological and mental health. Moreover, the work environment in health care industry is stressful and the attitude of medical colleagues is not much help either. This ultimately results in a lack of unity and empathy among the health care professionals.<sup>[4]</sup> There are many doctors who have a firm belief that they are only responsible for enhancement of the physical health of the patients which is why compassion and empathy is not needed.<sup>[5]</sup> When the patients are not empathized with and are not shown compassion, the patient-doctor relationship is further affected.<sup>[6]</sup> Illogical referral results in unnecessary treatments and investigations.<sup>[7]</sup> This also affects their treatment plan and creates patient-doctor mistrust. The Maharashtra Prevention of Cut Practices Act, 2017 is intended to make accepting or offering commissions for referral of patients by any healthcare provider as a legal offence.

These are the reasons why doctors are losing trust in India where this profession was considered one of the noblest professions of all. It is high time that steps are taken to deal with these issues. Health care institutions must create an ethical code that must be followed by all health care professionals strictly.<sup>[8]</sup> Building patient-doctor trust must also be given utmost importance so that it enhances the overall quality of care.<sup>[9-11]</sup> Continuous professional development by regular training, workshops, and seminars should be conducted for all doctors on the importance of communication, showing empathy and compassion to their patients. Health care professionals must realize the wonders that can happen when they actually listen and empathize with their own patients.<sup>[12]</sup> It greatly helps speed up the process of treatment and recovery. When more and more health care professionals start adapting these practices, the patient-doctor trust will greatly increase.

Doctors are vital players in the welfare of the entire society. They put in rigorous and long work hours, follow tough schedules, and make their patients their priorities – for this they should be highly appreciated and recognized. This is indeed what the National Doctors' Day is all about. It is also a day to reflect and contemplate on the changing scenario. It is essential for the doctors to make efforts to reestablish the lost trust. Professional organizations, health care authorities, and government must map out strategies to assist doctors in rebuilding this trust. They must also implement clear laws for health care professionals to abide by. These steps are essential to take to improve the health care industry in India. Here's hoping on this National Doctors' Day that medical profession restores the glory that it enjoyed in the golden era in the coming future. Let us make the required changes in our fraternity and our practices, before the situation gets any worse. All of us should also actively take steps to improve the image of the medical profession, because none of us is above this collective perception.

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#### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

**Suresh K Pandey, Vidushi Sharma**


SuVi Eye Institute and Lasik Laser Center, Kota, Rajasthan, India

Correspondence to: Dr. Suresh K. Pandey,  
SuVi Eye Institute and Lasik Laser Center,  
Kota - 324005, Rajasthan, India.  
E-mail: suresh.pandey@gmail.com

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