

Govt urged to make people aware of free fistula treatment facilities

KARACHI: Expressing concern over lack of progress in prevention and treatment of fistula, a devastating childbirth injury, health experts on Tuesday stated that half of the challenge in the country could be overcome if families only received the message that the illness was very much treatable at a certain government hospital and that, too, without incurring any costs.

They said this while speaking at a press briefing organised in connection with World Fistula Day by the Pakistan National Forum on Women's Health (PNFWH) in collaboration with Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) here at the Karachi Press Club. Speaking about this year's theme, Dr Shaheen Zafar, senior gynaecologist at Koohi Goth Women's Hospital, said it called for investment to improve quality of care for maternal health, fistula prevention and treatment and highlighted the key role of communities play in addressing social, cultural, political, and economic determinants that impacted maternal health and sexual reproductive health Pakistan, she said, yearly reported 3,000 to 5,000 cases of obstetric fistula. The condition either caused urinary incontinence, faecal incontinence or both. The development of fistula was directly linked to one of the major causes of maternal mortality obstructed labour. It's very much preventable if timely access to quality obstetric care is available to pregnant women.

'The Koohi Goth Hospital in Landhi provided free-of-cost treatment and rehab services to fistula patients. Doctors also arrange camps across the country to identify such cases. Right now, we have fistula centres in Karachi, Hyderabad, Larkana, Multan, Lahore, Quetta, Peshawar, Abbottabad and Islamabad,' said Dr Zafar.

Dr Sajjad Siddiqui representing PNFWH regretted lack of awareness about the illness, while emphasising on the government to come forward and play its due role in fistula prevention and treatment.

He shared details of experts' recent visit to Athmuqam tehsil in Azad Kashmir

where four women were identified with fistula and operated at a district hospital later. 'The actual number of fistula patients there could be much higher. These patients suffering in silence for the past few years weren't aware that their health problems can easily be treated.

Asked about government assistance, he said it provided free ward and admission to the patient. 'The rest including treatment and patient's transport cost is managed by the (international) Fistula Foundation and United Nations Population Fund.

'The least the government can do is to create mass awareness about the illness and the facilities where treatment is available free of cost,' he said, adding that nine fistula centres set up at tertiary care public sector hospitals in the country were fully functional.

Dr Sajjad also urged the international agencies to engage the relevant stakeholders in developing countries while setting targets for health and education.

'The United Nations has set 2030 as the year for ending fistula. This is unrealistic. Right now, we have two million women with fistula in the world while new cases add up every year. We don't have enough surgeons to operate,' he explained, adding that countries needed to work at multiple levels to achieve that target and that international agencies needed to look into the challenges developing countries faced.

Dr Abdul Ghafoor Shoro and Sheema Kermani representing Tehreek-i-Niswan also spoke.

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