General Studies-2; Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health

India's Public Healthcare

1) Introduction

- "Health is the real wealth of a nation", said Mahatma Gandhi.
- Public health is what the state does to prevent diseases and to protect health.

2) Present Problems

- India's healthcare suffers from quality, quantity, footprint, access and affordability issues.
- **The quantity problem.**
  a. The WHO estimates that India spent about $267 per capita on health care in PPP adjusted terms in 2014—China spent three times that amount, Brazil five times, European nations 10 times and the US 20 times.
  b. India spends only about 1.5% of GDP on public healthcare. Most countries spend two or more times that number.
  c. This allocation impacts infrastructure, supply of critical equipments, the number of hospitals and doctors, specialists, nurses and assistants.
- **The quality issue.**
  a. India suffers from an acute shortage of secondary and tertiary hospitals
  b. Significant shortfall in specialists and specialized equipment
  c. Rigid regulatory framework combined with corrupt enforcement.
  d. Inadequate feeder system from preventive health to primary care to secondary and tertiary referral
  e. Acute shortage of post-graduate seats for medical education
- **Access and affordability issues**
  a. Primary health centres (PHCs) are not present in many villages and wherever present they are severely undermanned.
  b. This deeply impacts prevention and early detection.
- Recent incidence of the cut in the supply of oxygen cylinders to the hospital in Gorakhpur highlights the failure of procurement management in the Indian public health system.
- The inefficiency in the procurement process results in both shortages and wastage.
- Research showed that the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna (RSBY) has failed to cover an adequate number of poor households.
- There is lack of all things important to human settlements—sanitation, disease surveillance, primary healthcare, tertiary hospitals, life-saving equipment, political will and public health response.

3) Recent steps taken by the Government

- National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) has dramatically reduced prices of knee implants and cardiac stents
- Launch of New National Health Policy 2017 (NHP) to strengthen India's healthcare system.
- Requiring the prescription of generics
- Door-to-door screening for the early detection and treatment of cancer, heart disorders, and diabetes
- An eHospital app has been launched with an Online Registration System (ORS) to reduce the burden of registration and other formalities needed at hospitals before treatment and checkup.

4) Concerns / Challenges

- Diseases drain our economy in two ways—loss of productivity and expenditure for healthcare.
- Nearly 70% of healthcare delivery is through private players which are largely unregulated.
- Experts have expressed concerns over NITI Aayog's idea for further privatisation of healthcare services instead for improvements in the public health infrastructure.
- According to the report of the Central Medical Services Society (CMSS), the timely supply of drugs, vaccines and contraceptives remained a major concern at the state level.
- With excesses in some places and shortages at others across the country, thereby affecting programme effectiveness
- Inadequate supply chain infrastructure and quality control.
- There is no public procurement law in India. It is governed by a set of guidelines.
- Non-communicable diseases are becoming epidemics—they are not easily prevented, except by huge changes in behaviour.
- NSSO data shows that the proportion of patients using public facilities has increased only marginally in rural areas despite rural public health facilities financed by the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)
- The lack of quality and assured healthcare in the country is emerging as a major concern, especially among India's youth.
- India loses more children under age 5 each year than any other country.

5) Way Forward

- A prevention and early detection system is a must if costs of the whole system for the country are to be contained.
- Increasing the number of drugs under price control.
- The government must consider bringing more medical devices under price control with the aim of making healthcare more accessible.
- The health ministry could also look at standardising the cost of certain treatments, so the prices don't vary across hospitals
- Progressively raising public health expenditure to 2.5% of GDP.
- Public procurement policy experts say that there is a dire need to have procurement specialists in government hospitals.
- Introduce e-tendering and direct payment into the bank account of the vendor or service provider of medical equipments to maintain transparency
- Enactment of public health Acts to provide the basic legislative underpinning for public health action
- India's employment guarantee schemes could use lessons from the US' Depression-era public works programme.
- In areas affected by malaria, this labour was used for large-scale drainage and other works to control malaria, with technical inputs from public health personnel.
- The Swachh Bharat campaign could also use such technical expertise to maximize its impact in reducing exposure to diseases.

6) Conclusion

- Democracies are for the welfare of all people.
- India must reinstate a functional public health infrastructure without any further loss of time.