

Coronavirus

From proud father to beggar

Virus leaves Indians mired in huge debts

NEW DELHI, July 26, (AP): As coronavirus cases ravaged India this spring, Anil Sharma visited his 24-year-old son Saurav at a private hospital in northwest New Delhi every day for more than two months. In May, as India's new COVID-19 cases broke global records to reach 400,000 a day, Saurav was put on a ventilator.

The sight of the tube running into Saurav's throat is seared in Sharma's mind. "I had to stay strong when I was with him, but immediately after, I would break down as soon as I left the room," he said.

Saurav is home now, still weak and recovering. But the family's joy is tempered by a mountain of debt that piled up while he was sick.

Life has been tentatively returning to normal in India as new coronavirus cases have fallen. But millions are embroiled in a nightmare of huge piles of medical bills. Most Indians don't have health insurance and costs for COVID-19 treatment have them drowning in debt.

Sharma exhausted his savings on paying for an ambulance, tests, medicines and an ICU bed. Then he took out bank loans.

As the costs mounted, he borrowed from friends and relatives. Then, he turned to strangers, pleading online for help on Ketto, an Indian crowd-

funding website. Overall, Sharma says he has paid over \$50,000 in medical bills.

The crowdfunding provided \$28,000, but another \$26,000 is borrowed money he needs to repay, a kind of debt he has never faced before.

"He was struggling for his life and we were struggling to provide him an opportunity to survive," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I was a proud father — and now I have become a beggar."

The pandemic has devastated India's economy, bringing financial calamity to millions at the mercy of its chronically underfunded and fragmented healthcare system. Experts say such costs are bound to hinder an economic recovery.

Insurance

"What we have is a patchwork quilt of incomplete public insurance and a poor public health system. The pandemic has shown just how creaky and unsustainable these two things are," said Vivek Dehejia, an economist who has studied public policy in India.

Even before the pandemic, healthcare access in India was a problem.

Indians pay about 63% of their medical expenses out-of-pocket. That's typical of many poor countries with inadequate government services. Data on global personal medical costs from the pandemic are hard to come by, but in India and many other countries treatment for COVID is a huge added burden at a time when hundreds of millions of jobs have vanished.

In India, many jobs returned as cities opened up after a severe lockdown in March 2020, but economists worry about the loss of some 12 million salaried positions. Sharma's job as a marketing professional was one of them.

When he asked his son's friends to set up the campaign on Ketto to raise funds, Sharma hadn't seen a paycheck in 18 months. Between April and June this year, 40% of the 4,500 COVID-19 campaigns on the site were for hospitalization costs, the company said.

The pandemic has driven 32 million Indians out of the middle class, defined as those earning \$10 to \$20 a day, according to a Pew Research Center study published in March. It estimated the crisis has increased the number of India's poor — those with incomes of \$2 or less a day — by 75 million.

"If you're looking at what pushes people into debt or poverty, the top two sources often are out-of-pocket health expenditure and catastrophic costs of treatment," said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India.

In the northeastern city of Imphal, 2,400 kilometers (1,490 miles) away, Diana Khumanthem lost both her mother and sister to the virus in May.

Treatment costs wiped out the family's savings, and when the private hospital where her sister died wouldn't release her body for last rites until a bill of about \$5,000 was paid, she pawned the family's gold jewelry to moneylenders.

When that wasn't enough, asked her friends, relatives and her sister's colleagues for help. She still owes some \$1,000.

A health insurance scheme launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018 was intended to cover around 500 million of India's 1.3 billion people and was a major step toward easing medical costs. But it doesn't cover the primary care and outpatient costs that comprise most out-of-pocket expenses. So it hasn't "effectively improved access to care and financial risk protection," said a working paper by researchers at Duke University.

Disparities

The program also has been hobbled by disparities in how various states implemented it, said Shawin Vitsupakorn, one of the paper's authors.

Another paper, by the Duke Global Health Institute and the Public Health Foundation of India, found costs of ICU hospitalization for COVID-19 are equivalent to nearly 16 months of work for a typical Indian day laborer or seven to 10 months for salaried or self-employed workers.

Meager funding of healthcare, at just 1.6% of India's GDP, is less, proportionately, than what Laos or Ethiopia spends. At the outbreak's peak in May, hospitals everywhere were overrun, but public facilities lacked the resources to handle the floods of patients coming in.

"The result is a suffering public health system, where the provision of care is often poor, prompting many to flock to private hospitals," said Dehejia.

A public hospital treated Khumanthem's mother, but her sister Ranjita was admitted to a private one that cost \$1,300 per day.

Ranjita was the family's only earner after Khumanthem left her nursing job last year to return home during the first wave of the virus. She's now hunting for work while looking after her father and her sister's 3-year-old son.

At her home in Imphal, Khumanthem grieved for her mother by remembering her favorite food — chagem pomba, a type of gruel made with vegetables, rice and soybeans. Every few minutes, she looked toward the front gate.

"This is usually the time Ranjita would return home from work," she said. "I still keep thinking she could walk through the gate any moment now."

Back in New Delhi, Sharma sighed in relief as an ambulance brought his son home from the hospital last week. Saurav needs physiotherapy to build up his weakened muscles, a daily nurse and a long list of medications. It may be weeks before he will be able to stand on his own, and months before the ambitious lawyer who graduated among the top of his class will be able to go to court again.

The costs will continue. "Our first priority was to save him," Sharma said. "Now we will need to figure out the rest."



Modi



Anil Sharma shows a photograph of his son Saurav who is being treated for COVID-19 at a private hospital in New Delhi, India, July 1. Life is tentatively returning to normal in India as coronavirus cases fall. But millions are embroiled in a nightmare of huge piles of medical bills. (AP)



In this July 27, 2006 file photo, WTN Radio talk show personality Phil Valentine hosts a town hall meeting in Liberty Hall at The Factory at Franklin in Franklin, Tenn. Valentine, a conservative talk radio host from Tennessee who had been a vaccine skeptic until he was hospitalized from COVID-19 now says his listeners should get vaccinated, July 25. (AP)



Almeida



Ley

Environment

Retiro, Prado join Heritage list: Madrid's tree-lined Paseo del Prado boulevard and the adjoining Retiro park have been added to UNESCO's World Heritage list.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, holding an online meeting from Fuzhou, China, backed the candidacy on Sunday that highlighted the green area's introduction of nature into Spain's capital. The influence the properties have had on the designs of other cities in Latin America was also applauded by committee members.

"Collectively, they illustrate the aspiration for a utopian society during the height of the Spanish Empire," UNESCO said.

The Retiro park occupies 1.2 square kilometers (1.3 square miles) in the center of Madrid. Next to it runs the Paseo del Prado, which includes a promenade for pedestrians. The boulevard connects the heart of Spain's art world, bringing together the Prado Museum with the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum and the Reina Sofia Art Centre.

The boulevard dates back to 16th century while the park was originally for royal use in the 17th century before it was fully opened to the public in 1848.

"Today, in these times of pandemic, in a city that has suffered enormously for the past 15 months, we have a reason to celebrate with the first world heritage site in Spain's capital," said Madrid mayor José Luis Martínez-Almeida.

The site is number 49 for Spain on the UNESCO list.

Also on Sunday, the committee added China's Emporium of the World in Song-Yuan, India's Kakatiya Rudreshwara Temple, and the Trans-Iranian railway to the World Heritage list. (AP)

Australia avoids 'downgrade': Australia garnered enough international support to defer an attempt by the United Nations' cultural organization to downgrade the Great Barrier Reef's World Heritage status because of damage caused by climate change.

UNESCO had recommended that its World Heritage Committee add the world's largest coral reef ecosystem off the northeast Australian coast to the World Heritage in Danger list, mainly due to rising ocean temperatures.

Australian-proposed amendments to the draft decision at a committee meeting in China on Friday would have deferred the "in danger" question until 2023.

Coronavirus

Spaniards put faith in COVID-19 vaccines

US headed in 'wrong direction': Fauci

WILMINGTON, Del., July 26, (AP): The United States is in an "unnecessary predicament" of soaring COVID-19 cases fueled by unvaccinated Americans and the virulent delta variant, the nation's top infectious diseases expert said Sunday.

"We're going in the wrong direction," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, describing himself as "very frustrated."

He said recommending that the vaccinated wear masks is "under active consideration" by the government's leading public health officials. Also, booster shots may be suggested for people with suppressed immune systems who have been vaccinated, Fauci said.

Fauci, who also serves President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser, told CNN's "State of the Union" that he has taken part in conversations about altering the mask guidelines.

He noted that some local jurisdictions where infection rates are surging, such as Los Angeles County, are already calling on individuals to wear masks in public regardless of vaccination status. Fauci said those local rules are compatible with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendation that the vaccinated do not need to wear masks in public.

Nearly 163 million people, or 49% of the eligible US population, are vaccinated, according to CDC data.

"This is an issue predominantly among the unvaccinated, which is the reason why we're out there, practically pleading with the unvaccinated people to go out and get vaccinated," Fauci said.

Fauci said government experts are reviewing early data as they consider whether to recommend that vaccinated individuals to get booster shots. He suggested that some of the most vulnerable, such as organ transplant and cancer patients, are "likely" to be recommended for booster shots.

Vaccination

He also praised Republicans, including Govs. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas and Ron DeSantis of Florida, and the second-ranking House leader, Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana, for encouraging their constituents to get vaccinated. Their states have among the lowest vaccination rates in the country.

"What I would really like to see is more and more of the leaders in those areas that are not vaccinating to get out and speak out and encourage people to

get vaccinated," Fauci said.

Hutchinson, also speaking on CNN, said he did not know whether he might have underestimated the hesitancy of people to get the vaccine, but acknowledged that "the resistance has hardened in certain elements and is simply false information. It is myths. As I go into these town hall meetings, someone said: 'Don't call it a vaccine. Call it a bioweapon.' And they talk about mind control. Well, those are obviously erroneous. Other members of the community correct that."



Like many of Spain's 20-somethings, Sergio Rosado has seen the new, more contagious coronavirus strain strike those too eager to cut loose when authorities rolled back health restrictions with vaccinations picking up pace.

But the 22-year-old student shares the country's widespread public trust in the vaccines, and Rosado plans to get his shots as soon as his turn comes.

Controlled

"I have friends that have caught COVID-19 at big parties. Lots of people I know have caught it," Rosado said. "I did go out too, but to places without many people and in controlled spaces, and with face masks."

Spain, like its fellow European Union members, got off to a slow start in administering shots compared to Britain and the United States after regulators approved the first vaccines. But once deliveries by drugmakers started flowing to meet demand, the country quickly made up ground.

After only fully vaccinating 10% of its adults from January until the end of April, now nearly 54% of its adults, around 25 million people, have received two vaccine jabs, making Spain one of the inoculation leaders in the 27-nation European Union.

The program is built on Spain's efficient public health care system, a well-ordered vaccination plan that stuck strictly to age groups, and a populace confident in the safety of childhood immunizations and therefore largely resistant to skepticism about COVID-19 jabs.

"Vaccination forms part of our genome," Amós García, president of the Spanish Association of Vaccinology, told The Associated Press. "Our professionals have always believed

strongly in the benefits of vaccines. We have always strongly encouraged children from a very young age to get their vaccines."

He said general vaccination rates for children in Spain were over 95%.

Spain's public health care system, which has suffered budget cuts in the past decade, buckled last year under the first wave of the virus, which has claimed at least 81,000 lives in the country.

Hesitate

But fears that the health system wouldn't be up to the job of managing a massive vaccine rollout proved unfounded. Eligibility information was widely disseminated, and people didn't hesitate to sign up when it was their age group's turn. Vaccination lines generally moved swiftly, and unlike France, there was no paperwork to get in the way when people went to their local clinics or mass vaccination points.

It also helped that no politician, not even on the fringes of the right or left, sowed doubts about the vaccines. The only political issue regarding the vaccines was when they weren't arriving fast enough, and regional health authorities in charge of administering them demanded more quicker.

"This is not a question of progressives or of conservatives. It is a public health question," Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told MSNBC while on a visit last week to the United States.

Unlike Germany or France, Spain doesn't have a big anti-vaccine movement. More than 90% of Spain's public health workers have been vaccinated, compared with 42% of public health workers in France.

So while France and Greece have had to pressure skeptics and procrastinators into getting their shots by making vaccines mandatory for people working certain jobs, such as paramedics and nursing home workers, Spaniards have so far needed very little prodding.

In methodically working its way from the most elderly downward, Spain achieved its first goal: stopping the most vulnerable from dying. But the emphasis on vaccines as the salvation could also have contributed to Spain's young letting down their guards as curfews and face mask requirements were lifted, just as the delta variant arrived.

But Norway moved amendments that put the reef back on the committee's agenda at its annual meeting next June.

In the meantime, a monitoring mission will visit the reef to determine how the

impact of climate change can be managed.

Australian Environment Minister Susan Ley told the virtual meeting that downgrading the reef's status before the



In this undated photo provided by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, a diver monitors the health of the Great Barrier Reef off the Australian coast. Australia on July 23, garnered enough international support to defer for two years an attempt by the United Nations' cultural organization to downgrade the Great Barrier Reef's World Heritage status. (AP)

committee had finalized its own climate change policy made no sense. (AP)



Venice avoids designation: Venice and its lagoon environment avoided placement on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites in danger following Italy's ban on massive cruise ships traveling through the city's historic center. Preservation groups immediately criticized the decision by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee.

The committee, which is meeting in China instead has asked Italy to submit by December 2022 an update on efforts to protect Venice from excessive tourism, population decline and other issues that will be considered at a meeting in 2023.

The Italian government moved this month to avoid the danger designation, pledging to reroute massive cruise ships starting Aug. 1 from the city's historic center to an industrial port still within the Venice lagoon. The ships' passage through St Mark's Basin and the Giudecca Canal, which resumed recently after a long pandemic pause, was among the reasons UNESCO had cited for listing Venice's status as at risk.

Italian Culture Minister Dario Franceschini welcomed UNESCO's decision and credited the government's recent move to ban ships over 25,000 tons from Venice waterways facing St Mark's Basilica and the Doges Palace. (AP)