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AN AILING SYSTEM?

Currently, there are 45,600 undergraduate medical seats in India, but only 22,000 postgraduate ones. Medical students and doctors have launched a campaign to equalise these numbers, saying this is leading to a serious shortage of specialist doctors

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On Thursday, over 1,000 people staged a four-hour dharna at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, demanding that the number of postgraduate seats in medical colleges be increased and that the mandatory rural posting for medical students become voluntary. Organised by the Indian Medical Association and Delhi Medical Association, a portion of these protesters were students and doctors from a national campaign called Save the Doctor, launched last month.

This campaign, through offline events and social media campaigning, is fighting against the disparity in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate seats. As per their data, there are currently 45,600 undergraduate seats in Indian medical colleges, but only 22,000 postgraduate ones. Of these, only 12,000 postgraduate seats are in clinical fields, which most students are interested in. This means that only a fraction of students can specialise in fields such as surgery, gynaecology, radiology, pediatrics, etc. The others have to take gap years and re-apply until they gain admission, leading to a serious shortage of qualified doctors in the country.

The Save the Doctor campaign has garnered support from over 12,000 people. The campaign asks supporters to sign appeals demanding change, and forwards them directly to the union health ministry, which is responsible for deciding the number of national medical seats. In the first 15 days of the campaign, about 10,000 appeals were sent.

Why 'Save the Doctor'?

Navneet Motreja, 25, launched the campaign while preparing for his postgraduate medical entrance exams. "In 2008, the government increased undergraduate seats by adding more recognised medical colleges. However, the number of postgraduate seats remained the same," he says. "Because of this disparity, the number of MD doctors graduating per year is less than half than undergraduate MBBS doctors. The rest of us have to spend year after year in coaching classes." This is also leading hopeful doc-



Over 1,000 medical students and doctors assembled at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, to protest the mandatory one-year rural internship and dearth of PG seats, on Thursday.

AT A GLANCE

- There are **45,600** undergraduate medical seats, likely to reach **50,000** shortly
- Only **12,000** postgraduate seats in clinical fields, which most doctors prefer
- In comparison, the US has **19,000** UG seats and **32,000** PG and fellowship seats
- With a pass rate of 80% to 90%, nearly **40,000** Indian doctors graduate every year and compete for **12,000** seats with their batchmates and seniors. In the last postgraduate entrance exam under the NEET, over **1,10,000** doctors competed to for postgraduate seats

Source: Save The Doctor

To learn more about the campaign, visit www.savethedoctor.in

tries," says Motreja.

Medical students are becoming disillusioned with the profession, since achieving their ambition of becoming doctors has become difficult. "The average student becomes a specialist doctor at 35 in India. After almost 12 years of studying and the compulsory rural posting, the social service aspect of the profession is extinguished, and you want to start earning as much money as you can," says Kavya Shekhar, a 24-year-old medical student from MVJ Medical College.

"It's sad that nearly two lakh young Indian doctors at the peak of their youth end up spending years in coaching classes, mugging up multiple choice questions instead of treating patients. With the right circumstances, they can significantly improve the quality of health care in the country," says Dr Devi Shetty, treasurer, Association of Healthcare Providers India.

To challenge this system, Motreja and other aspiring doctors launched the Save the Doctor campaign, which has 700 members across the country and over 56,000 Facebook supporters. They have two representatives from each zone—North, South, East and West. Medical colleges have individual volunteers, who will further awareness through social media, personal contact and planned protest marches.

TALK TO US

Do you think more PG medical seats will solve the problem of lack of specialist doctors? Let us know.

Share your views on our Facebook page: HT Education Mumbai or send us an email on letters@hindustantimes.com

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Raising the number of medical postgraduate seats is not difficult, according to experts. Dr Suleiman Merchant, head of department of radiology and ex-dean, Sion Hospital, says, "As per Medical Council of India norms, there is no maximum limit of doctors in the postgraduate course. The workload is immense in government hospitals, and there is enough infrastructure in most hospitals to increase the number of postgraduate seats even by four times." The campaign proposes that each

postgraduate professor should mentor three students, instead of the current 1:1 ratio. Also, associate professors could take charge of teaching one student each. "If associate professors were given their long-due promotions, the number of students they are allowed to teach will considerably increase," says Merchant. The Tata Hospital in Parel did just that a few months ago, and is now qualified to handle almost double the number of postgraduate students as earlier.

COUNTERPOINT

Not all doctors agree with the cause. "Every doctor doesn't need to be a specialist," says Dr PP Lahane, academic committee mentor at Medical Council of India and an ophthalmologist.

"There is plenty of need for general MBBS doctors too, especially in rural areas."

There are seven non-clinical and five clinical postgraduate departments. "Most people want to pursue clinical fields such as OPD and gynecology, where the money is," says Lahane. "Seats

in non-clinical or research courses such as biochemistry, anatomy and forensics run empty. Young doctors need to understand their responsibilities to develop the medical fraternity as a whole."

According to him, the MCI has announced that 6,000 seats will be added to the postgraduate pool starting from 2014. "Almost ₹20 crore to ₹50 crore have already been transferred to 11 of the 14 medical colleges in Maharashtra," he says. "This might set the path for the number to increase further."

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