

Radiologists: The latest victims of an unfair system

Dear Sir,

Every time the official policies fail to curb the plummeting sex ratio, ultrasound is used as the punching bag. It is like banning the use of cars to prevent road traffic accidents! The fact that the misplaced belief system of our society is the origin of such a crime is sidelined in favor of lynching the doctors. If there is no demand, there will be no supply. The reverse is unlikely. Not surprisingly, India stands fourth in the list of nations most unsafe for women.

Doctors' community is historically known to be soft targets for policy-makers. Doctors usually find themselves "too sophisticated" and "too busy" to come out on streets and launch protest against unfair implementation of law. I cannot imagine what would break loose if unfair practices on similar lines were to be imposed against some other professionals.

Though Medical Council of India (MCI) has clearly mentioned in its ethics code that no doctor should claim to be a specialist unless he/she has a qualification in that branch, violations are rampant. Despite clear regulations, the government allows nonradiologists to practice ultrasound after just 6 months of training. Then it is not surprising that some of the doctors caught red-handed in sting operations were infact nonradiologists! For a qualified sonologist, ultrasound practice is the only source of income, whereas for a nonradiologist, an ultrasound machine is just an additional source of income. Common sense dictates that most radiologists would never risk their practice and reputation by involvement in something as grotesque as sex determination, though exceptions is a rule. If the government strictly restricts the practice of ultrasound to qualified radiologists, which is their duty, the government's burden of vigilance will also reduce. But the authorities have preferred to turn a blind eye

toward this blatant unethical practice of ultrasonography by nonradiologists.

While ultrasound can detect sex of the fetus, it does not perform the actual act of abortion. Abortion centers are a big business at many places across the country. While the original aim behind allowing these centers was to reduce the rate of septic abortions, their misuse is rampant.

If we take a closer look, a great majority of the sonography machines were sealed for minor violations, the most common of which being error in filling the "F" form. I am not trying to justify mistakes, but merely analyzing them. Though the variation in the degree of violations of norms is so great, the immediate punishment imposed has been uniform, i.e., seizing of ultrasound machines for an indefinite period. For a sonologist it means complete cessation of his only source of income. A basic, small ultrasound unit costs somewhere between 12 and 15 lakhs, whereas better versions cost above 25 lakhs. Furthermore, the real estate cost, especially in a metro city, needs no explanation. All this usually means a huge bank loan for most radiologists. Who is going to pay for the financial loss, mental harassment, and defamation incurred by the radiologist who is incorrectly penalized earlier and acquitted later? Punishment before trial is not a feature of a democratic, civilized society.

I completely agree that it is the duty of radiologists to see to it that errors in documentation are avoided. I also agree that if errors are found, appropriate action should be taken by the authorities. The question is what is "appropriate." Is sealing an ultrasound clinic just because of a grammatical mistake in a document justified? Should not the punishment be commensurate with the mistake? Can such an error be evidence enough to prove involvement in female feticide? Then does clean documentation completely exclude the possibility of criminal activities? If the recent events are anything to go by, the answer unfortunately is yes. If similar exemplary standards of flawless documentation were to be applied uniformly, our courts would be full of cases against those responsible for errors in birth certificates, voter IDs, ration cards, driving license, and innumerable other official documents.

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As doctors and members of a civilized society, it is our responsibility to do our best to stop inhuman practices like female feticide. However, protecting our self-interest from being jeopardized by faulty implementation of policies is equally important. Overcoming the problem of deteriorating sex ratio requires a combination of change in the mindset of society and impartial implementation of law, which unfortunately in our country is likely to remain a distant dream. Honest doctors are as much a victim of an

unfair system as the ones who protested on streets with Anna Hazare.

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