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44% advised surgeries needlessly, finds survey `Even Docs Seek 2nd Opinion If Told To Go Under Knife'

Is surgery necessary? A medical second opinion services centre has found an uncomfortable answer to this question that traumatizes every family when a dear one is advised surgery. Almost 44% of the 12,500 patients for whom surgery was recommended were advised against it by their second opinion consultants.

Unnecessary surgery is not new in medicine. Orthopaedic surgeons in the US were, four months ago, accused of recommending unnecessary total knee replacements in at least a third of the cases. Closer home, doctors in Andhra Pradesh rampantly performed hysterectomies in 2010 to get a higher payoff from government medical insurance schemes.

MediAngels, a second opinion centre based out of Navi Mumbai, recently studied its first 20,000 consultations over the past two years and found several people were advised “unnecessary surgeries” by their primary doctors. Many doctors themselves sought a second opinion when advised to undergo surgery. Gaurav Sharma's uncle, for instance, was advised cardiac surgery due to a severe left shoulder pain. “We were told to undergo surgery the next day itself. Our entire family went into a tizzy,” he recalled. Sharma logged into MediAngel's online chat with a cardiac surgeon in Delhi who said the patient only had an orthopaedic problem. Gaurav Sharma whose uncle was advised cardiac surgery due to severe left shoulder pain was stopped just in time. “I then sought an opinion from a shoulder specialist in the US, who diagnosed that my uncle's shoulder and arm bones were not aligned properly. He showed my uncle some shoulder exercises on an online chat,” said Sharma, adding that his uncle's pain has considerably reduced.

Dr Debraj Shome, a surgeon who owns MediAngels, a second opinion centre based out of Navi Mumbai, said data showed poor adherence to surgery guidelines across all specialties. “We found that the discrepancy in opinions (between the patient's doctors and the second opinion-giver) was highest in heart problems at 55%.” Knee replacements and hysterectomies were second at 48% while infertility was third on the list with 45% discrepancy in opinions.

“This data shows that we have reason to be concerned,” said liver surgeon Dr Sanjay Nagral, who is on the editorial board of the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics. “Everything in Indian healthcare is increasingly getting monetized. This is an indicator of that malaise.” Another surgeon who didn't want to be named said, “In India, doctors are paid on the basis of the `business' they bring to a hospital. Obviously, a surgeon will be tempted to recommend surgery,” he said.

A doctor at a public hospital said an audit of government-run insurance schemes would reveal a similar trend of unnecessary surgeries. “Most money that the government pumps in for schemes such as the Rajiv Gandhi Arogya Yojana in Maharashtra is given to private hospitals that have been drafted in to do such procedures. One must probe why public hospitals don't get as many surgeries or as much money as the private ones do in such schemes?” he said.

Some specialists, though, say there is a logical reason for the discrepancy in MediAngel's data. "There are many nonmedical ways that compete with surgery as a form of treatment. So, in India, it is more a case of whom the patient goes first for consultation--whether a surgeon or a medicine specialist," said Dr Nagral.

In the UK, for instance, there are tumour boards in hospitals that comprise a radiotherapist, a surgeon and medical specialist who decide together on the treatment plan for a patient. "Radiation is emerging as a competitor to surgery in many cancers. Hence, instead of offering independent opinion from doctors, many hospitals there offer a tumour board's opinion," he said. In the US where healthcare is mainly paid for by insurance companies, some states require two opinions on the need for a surgery .