

## Dr Ketan Desai and the Medical Council of India: Lessons to be learnt

**E**lection to any position on the Medical Council of India - as, indeed, to any responsible position on any public service agency - ought to be on the basis of integrity, competence, proven service to fellow-citizens and an aptitude for the position.

As is common knowledge, elections to our national and state-level medical councils are fought with just one aim: to enrich oneself personally. Expenditure of huge sums; a total lack of scruples; political connections; a compulsive desire to grab power by any means, both fair and foul and finally, ruthless pursuit of the goal of personal enrichment are absolute necessities.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that our medical councils are hopelessly corrupt, incompetent and disinterested in the common good. No wonder, the Delhi High Court in a recent judgement labeled the Medical Council of India as 'a den of corruption'.

The reported sum spent by candidates for election as President of the Medical Council of India exceeds a crore of rupees. Were the actual figure even a tenth of this amount it is easy to see how no honest individual can ever aspire to serve in this position. It is also obvious that a person spending such a huge sum will have as his primary goal the recovery of his capital investment along with 'adequate' returns on it in the shortest possible period. The seeds of corruption have already been sown.

### Two encouraging events

Thanks to the crusading efforts of a handful of individuals, we are provided a glimmer of hope.

The setting aside of the fraudulent results of the elections to the Maharashtra Medical Council was the first of these events.

More important is the recent decision by the High Court in Delhi against Dr Ketan Desai, President of the Medical Council of India. After the Court found him guilty of corruption he was forced to resign from the Selection Committee of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

Much remains to be done. The identification of wrongs in bodies such as the Medical Councils by our courts is a great step forward but cannot, by itself, bring about any permanent change.

Take the example in Maharashtra. Despite the passage of many months, nothing further has been done to restore normalcy to this body or eliminate the many inadequacies that permitted fraud over decades. The government rests, having followed the court directive to appoint an administrator. In all probability it will continue its siesta till

the court is moved once again - against many odds and with the expenditure of much time, energy and money - and convinced to issue a fresh directive.

If events run true to form, a similar fate will befall the Medical Council of India.

Making malpractice difficult, if not impossible, requires major changes in the rules and regulations governing medical councils, their constitutions and their modes of operation. These changes must liberate these councils from control by the politicians and the bureaucrats both at the central or state levels.

At the moment even the members purporting to represent the state governments in the Medical Council of India are nominated by the Central Government. In addition, New Delhi appoints another eight members as government nominees. This results in automatic 'election' of a government-backed individual as President of the Medical Council. The President enjoys unfettered powers for five long years of his term. Since there is no bar on repeated re-elections of the same individual, a person can stay as President of MCI virtually for life! Such a long duration of control over the Council by one individual breeds vested interests and corruption. Besides younger entrants to the profession are denied the opportunity to bring new ideas. All these need to be changed.

The workings of these councils must be totally transparent both to members of the medical profession and to the public at large.

These goals, by themselves, pose formidable difficulties under present circumstances. Let us however, for a moment, imagine that they have, somehow, been achieved. We would still have a long way to go for there is yet another essential requirement for the restoration of normalcy - a change in the character of the medical professional.

Honest, dedicated and sincere doctors must be encouraged to stand as candidates to these councils. The rest of us must support such candidates and ensure their election. We must also guarantee the failure of any person demanding unmarked ballot papers or using other unfair means to frustrate the spirit of free and fair election.

We must also monitor the functioning of these councils, make our displeasure at fraudulent or unethical practice known and felt and, in general, serve as watchdogs to keep the councils on the straight and narrow path.

Should we prove capable of all this and more, we shall earn the gratitude of our fellow-citizens and of those who are yet to become doctors.

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X (1), January-March 2002 •

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