

Mobile hospitals carry smiles to rural India

If they can't come to us, let us go to them. Armed with this ideology, a mobile hospital with all amenities for basic health care services, given free, has been doing the rounds in rural India across five states. Now it will run on Delhi's roads.

'Smile on Wheels', as the mobile hospital is called, is an initiative of the Smile Foundation, an NGO based in Delhi.

Started in the year 2006, this initiative has until now reached nearly 750,000 people in 249 villages across Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Under this programme, five vans travel the roads of each of these states everyday, covering more than 25 km and two-three villages on rotation basis, rendering health care free.

Shantanu Mishra, one member of the executive committee, the think tank of the programme, said the van is now ready to run on Delhi's roads and reach out to the underprivileged.

'Mobility is extremely important in health care. In villages where a proper hospital is miles away - and the one which might be close by, like the government hospital, is almost always without any staff - health care always takes a back seat. This programme is a step to address that issue,' Mishra told IANS.

'In this programme, the mobile hospital which has all the services required for basic health care, especially for women, goes from village to village and gives the underprivileged the health care which they need but cannot afford,' he added.

The vans, painted bright green and yellow with happy faces of children, are laden with all the necessary equipments and services like an X-ray machine, ECG machine, basic pathological services for blood and urine test, ante-natal and post-natal services and an out-patient department for common ailments.

The staff also distribute condoms and oral contraceptive pills and lay emphasis on family planning. Iron folic tablets, especially for women, a majority of whom are anaemic, are distributed as well.

'We have partnered with local organizations in all the five states in order to run this programme. In Uttar Pradesh, it's a corporate trust, in Orissa it's an event-based organisation and so on,' Mishra said.

'The selection of the states has been random. As we go on, we are learning a lot and ultimately we plan to implement this programme in all states of the country,' Mishra added.

One of the lessons learnt was that the X-ray machine was not working accurately because of some fault in mounting it in the van and lack of a dark room. With a change in the technical design, this fault has now been rectified.

An important aspect of this programme is that after taking rounds of the villages, the doctor and the medical staff return to the centre in the town.

'Since the doctor knows that at the end of the day he can go back to his family in the town, we have got good support. It's not like doctors of the government hospitals, who for lack of a vision of a bright future in the rural areas, hardly attend to the needs of their patients in the villages,' Mishra said.

The vans are to run on [Chennai](#) roads as well.

'The programme has been launched in Delhi April 1 but by the time they actually ply on the roads it will be a month. The van is ready, with all the medical amenities. We are just working out the areas where the van will ply... it will basically be the slum areas in and around Delhi,' he added.

Ultimately, the programme aims to run a fleet of 30 fully equipped mobile medical vans in collaboration with local NGOs and reach out to over four million people.

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