

Help at hand for reproductive health problems

Those wishing to know about contraception, reproductive health and sexual dysfunctions can take heart as the answers to their queries are now just a phone call away.

In a novel public-private venture to stabilise the country's exploding population and promote safe sex and family planning methods, the country's first helpline on 'Reproductive health, Family Planning and Child Health' was inaugurated in the capital Tuesday.

Callers can dial 011-66665555, with their queries from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

A team of executives and a doctor will answer questions about sexual health concerns, breast-related problems, sexually transmitted infections, contraception, pregnancy, infertility, abortions, menopause and puberty and explain the functioning of the reproductive systems of males and females in the context of queries.

Besides, the helpline will also work towards removing popular misconceptions about sex, important in a country like India, where the subject is still taboo.

The Jansankhya Sthirata Kosh (National Population Stabilisation Fund), a registered autonomous society under the health and family welfare ministry set up with a corpus of Rs.1 billion from the government, tied up with vCustomer, an international business processing organisation (BPO), to spread sexual health awareness.

The target audiences are from the small and medium towns in the Hindi heartland states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

'These are the states where the rates of fertility, infant mortality and maternal deaths are very high and awareness about sexual health abysmally poor owing to a combination of socio-economic factors and scant access to information,' the fund's executive director Shailaja Chandra told IANS.

Speaking at the inauguration of the helpline centre at the vCustomer premises, Health Secretary Naresh Dayal said the government has been trying to address the issue of family planning over the past four decades. 'But it is sensitive in nature. The positive thing is that we now have a young population who wants to make informed choices.'

The service has a data bank of 550 questions on reproductive and child health, prepared with the help of doctors from the Maulana Azad College, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, St. Stephen's Medical Hospital, Lady Hardinge Medical College and Kalawati Saran Children's Hospital.

It was running on a pilot basis in Delhi and adjoining townships like Noida and Gurgaon since April. The centre receives 500 calls on an average every day, said Smita Agarwal, operational in-charge of the fund.

'The callers were mostly from the fringe areas of the capital and NCR till last week, but since yesterday (Monday) we have been flooded with calls from Uttar Pradesh. We did not advertise; publicity was by word of mouth,' Agarwal said.

The calls are charged, but six months later the number will become toll-free, officials said.

According to Navin Joshua, director of vCustomer, it is a new kind of business opportunity for the company in the healthcare customer support segment, which has tremendous potential.

'When business comes with a cause, it becomes delightful. The knowledge and the expertise that we acquire about the domestic health market from this initiative will help broaden our sphere of operations in India,' Joshua told IANS.

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