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Govt plans to make India cataract free in 5 yrs

Non-govt bodies to rope in for large-scale operations

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NEW DELHI: The Ministry of Health plans to roll out a five year programme to free India from cataract that causes an economic loss of at least Rs 8 lakh crore every year.

The scheme, for which the Centre would bear the cost, seeks to rope in non-govern-

mental outfits, private eye clinics and government hospitals for large scale cataract operations

The government has proposed a Rs 756 crore programme by enhancing the budgetary allocation towards the National Programme for Control of Blindness (NPCB) that has seen limited success so far.

In the last three fiscals, the NPCB spent more than Rs 3 crore but could only support cataract surgeries of 42 lakh patients.

On the other hand, the private hospitals performed at least 200 lakh surgeries in the same time.

As the difference in cost of a cataract surgery conducted by private entities and the government is huge, mainly due to the price differences of the intra-ocular lenses, the proposed scheme envisages a financial assistance of Rs 2,000 for each

operation, including the cost of the lenses manufactured in India.

The plan is to target 786 lakh people — 237 lakhs in the next two years and 549 lakhs in the subsequent three years — sources told DH.

The surgery cost would be upwards of Rs 700 crore while the rest of the money would be spent on administration, information technology for monitoring and generating the promotional material to popularise the scheme.

In the countryside, Accred-

ited Social Health Activists (ASHA) would identify 50 plus patients from door to door campaign. An ASHA worker would get Rs 300 as incentives for every operated case, sources said.

In every district, a society would be created involving the government, private doctors and clinics, and NGOs for monitoring purpose. The government also plans to create a smart phone application in this connection.

The government's plan to focus on cataract comes in the

wake of extensive economic analysis that shows how cataract affects economic productivity. In 2015, the total economic loss on account of cataract blindness in adults was pegged at over Rs 8.22 lakh crores.

Last year, a scientific study found that Indian rural women, who typically cook using wood, crop residues and dried cattle dung, are more likely to have visually impairing nuclear cataracts in which the central portion of the lens turns opaque first.