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The Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council (NAC) will discuss the feasibility of implementing the recommendations of an expert group, which has proposed substantially increasing spending on healthcare and providing free life-saving medicines, with the Union health ministry.

The government-appointed expert group for developing a plan to ensure universal health coverage presented its recommendations to the council on Wednesday.

NAC member A.K. Shiva Kumar, who is also part of the expert group, said members of the council will take up the recommendations with the health ministry. Ministry officials couldn’t be reached for a comment.

The expert group’s recommendations include increasing public expenditure on health to at least 2.5% of gross domestic product by the end of the 12th Plan, and to at least 3% by 2022; ensuring availability of free essential drugs by increasing public spending on drug procurement; ensuring expenditure on primary healthcare should account for at least 70% of all healthcare expenditure; not levying fees of any kind on use of healthcare services under universal health coverage; and integrating all government funded insurance schemes with the universal health coverage system.

India will be unable to reap the benefits of the “demographic dividend” of having a large working population, if it does not make “adequate investment” on health and education, Srinath Reddy, chairman of the expert group, said in the presentation to the council. Mint has reviewed a copy of the presentation.

"The present situation of healthcare is unacceptable, because of low levels of health system performance and high levels of health inequity," the presentation said.

The expert group was appointed by the government in October 2010. Its report was submitted to the Planning Commission in November last year.

"We want to know what the government’s viewpoint is on the issue, we will then discuss it at the NAC," said N.C. Saxena, another NAC member.

The expert group will also make a presentation at the Prime Minister’s Office next month to mobilise political support for its proposals.

"Ultimately, it is for the Planning Commission and the government to decide which of these or whether all of these recommendations get accepted," Reddy said. "I am hopeful that the political wisdom will see why universal health coverage is required.”

Although in the Union budget last week the budgetary allocation for health was raised by 21.5% to ₹30,702 crore, experts maintain that it is not sufficient.

Both Reddy and the National Advisory Council are optimistic that the expert group’s recommendations will be considered favourably by the government.

"There is a serious financial crisis before the government… but they will have to take hard decisions,” Shiva Kumar said.
Separately, in its Wednesday meeting, the council also made suggestions and accepted the draft recommendations of its working group for a social security package for workers in the unorganized sector. NAC is likely to give its final recommendations to the government soon.

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