Govt against unethical promotion of drugs

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NEW DELHI: Aggressive marketing of drugs by pharmaceutical companies is equal to "irrational use" that needs to be "penalized," the steering committee on health headed by Planning Commission member Syeda Hameed has said.

The steering committee report submitted to the commission for the 12th five year plan says there is need for a mandatory code for identifying and penalizing unethical promotion on the part of pharma companies.

It took the example of the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) of the US and how it has mandated strict regulations to curb unethical promotions. These include mandated disclosure by pharmaceutical companies of the expenditure incurred on drug promotion, ghost writing in promotion of pharma products to attract disqualification of the author and penalty on the company and vetting by FDA of drug related material in continuing medical education.

To avoid medical conflicts of interest, the US government is proposing to bring in a law that would require drug companies to disclose the payments they make to doctors for research, consulting, speaking, travel and entertainment. "Such practices can be replicated in India," the committee said.

A recent study by the commission's high-level expert group (HLEG) on universal health coverage headed by Dr K Srinath Reddy said the pharmaceutical industry spent over 25% of their annual turnover on sales promotion alone as compared to a paltry 7% on research and development in 2008-09. It also brought to light the widespread use of irrational drugs.

India, the study said, had the dubious distinction of its pharmaceutical market being flooded with about 90,000 formulation packs and brands.

"The market is awash with irrational, non-essential and hazardous drugs. Of the top 10 products which accounted for 10% of the medicines sold in the market, two belong to the category of irrational vitamin combinations and cough syrup while the other is a liver drug of unproven efficacy. Ten of the top 25 products sold in India in 1999 belonged to one of these categories: blood tonic, cough expectorant, non-drug formulations, analgesics, nutrients and liver drug which are hazardous, non-essential or irrational," the report said.

In order to regulate medical practice and uphold the rights of patients to rational treatment of good quality and reasonable cost, the steering committee has suggested medical audits to assess extent of compliance with Standard Treatment Guidelines.

It said habitual violations of guidelines should attract disciplinary action. "There is a need to revise and strengthen the existing regulatory mechanism for medical practice to prevent willful negligence and malpractice," it said.
The need for standard treatment protocols for various diseases has got the official push from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Union health secretary P K Pradhan said that once the protocols are ready, doctors, nurses, pharmacists and community health workers would have to adhere to them strictly in public health facilities. "All doctors and nurses under the NRHM will be bound by the protocols that are being finalized. Tamil Nadu has such protocols in place. We will follow them and circulate standard protocols to all states for immediate implementation," Pradhan said.

The ministry says incorrect drug choices, overdose, under dose and choice of more expensive drugs when less expensive drugs would be equally or more effective is a major problem in public health facilities.