



Language changes for Indian medical education

Medical students will have the option to learn in Hindi for the first time. Dinesh C Sharma reports from New Delhi.

This month, about 4000 students entering 24 medical colleges in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh will have the option of pursuing their MBBS degree in Hindi. It is the first time that medical students will be able to learn in Hindi, and comes amid the Indian Government's push to promote Hindi in administration and other spheres. Aside from Osmania University, Hyderabad, India, which offered medical courses in Urdu between 1918 and 1948, English has been the language of choice in medical schools across India. The Madhya Pradesh Directorate of Medical Education has developed Hindi textbooks for subjects taught to first-year students of anatomy, biochemistry, and physiology, although standard medical vocabulary has been retained in English throughout the translated texts. Both Hindi and English will be used in the classroom lectures, and students will be given the choice of writing their exams in either language.

Since 2017, National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for medical courses has been done in Hindi and other Indian languages. The new education policy introduced in 2020 emphasised imparting technical education in the mother tongue. In its October, 2022, report the Parliamentary Committee on Official Language recommended Hindi as the language of instruction in higher education in Hindi-speaking states. Committee Chairman and Minister for Home Affairs, Amit Shah, who launched the medical textbooks on Oct 16, 2022, said, "students should come out of their linguistic inferiority complex" and "showcase their abilities in their own language". Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a tweet, termed the launch of the Hindi textbooks as "historic".

"We have observed in Madhya Pradesh that almost 50% of students qualifying in the entrance test come

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from rural, semi-urban, and tribal areas where schooling is mostly in Hindi. Many of those coming from English medium schools also find it difficult to comprehend English. Such students face difficulties in medical colleges. We want to help them", explained Vishvas Kailash Sarang, Madhya Pradesh Medical Education Minister. The textbooks, he said, were developed through consultation with deans of medical colleges, linguists, and medical experts. They were peer-reviewed and feedback from students was taken. The textbooks are published by Elsevier, which also publishes *The Lancet*. *The Lancet* is editorially independent of its publisher.

The initiative has attracted some concerns from doctors. "It is a retrograde step that will jeopardise the careers of young medics and hit the quality of health care. Graduates trained in native languages will find it difficult to apply for international fellowships or appear for foreign licensing exams, and within India, they may be least preferred for jobs", said Rohan Krishnan, President of the Federation of All India Medical Associations, which represents medical students and resident doctors.

Shriprakash Kalantri, Professor of Medicine at Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram, India, said that the hasty introduction of native languages in medical education in a country with multiple languages could dilute its quality. "Our institute

currently has students from 16 Indian states and faculty comes from 14 states. If we start teaching in Marathi, the local language, students will have to deal with a dual burden—English and Marathi—and teachers will have to learn a new language. And this situation is common across medical schools in other states", he explained. In addition, Kalantri said, researchers trained in regional languages might face problems critically appraising and publishing research in international journals.

Dileep Mavalankar, Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar, India, said that "several Indian states are bigger than many European countries, in terms of population size and health needs. Those trained in Indian languages may find it difficult to go abroad, but they will be better placed to serve in rural areas and have effective patient communication." Such doctors, according to Mavalankar, would also help reduce the social distance between the doctor and patients.

Two more states, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, have announced plans to follow the Madhya Pradesh model. Ministers in Tamil Nadu have said that they will release textbooks in Tamil in December, 2022. The national regulator, National Medical Commission (NMC) and its Undergraduate Medical Education Board, did not respond to queries sent by *The Lancet* about regulatory approval for the two-language combination medical courses. Officials in Madhya Pradesh maintained that explicit approval of NMC was not necessary because "we are not replacing the existing English-based system, but only adding a complementary and optional Hindi system". The Indian Medical Association also did not answer queries from *The Lancet* on the subject.

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