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Better healthcare still out of bounds 

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NEW DELHI: India may be among the fastest growing economies in the world, but the UNDP's Human Development Report 2006 shows that this growth hasn't translated into better public healthcare for the citizen, at least not as yet.

For instance, there are only seven countries — of the 177 that the HDR looks at — with a lower share of public expenditure in total health expenditure.

These seven — Guinea, Congo, Myanmar, Cambodia, Armenia, Tazikistan and Burundi — are not exactly those with whom India would like to be compared, but they are the only ones in which the government accounts for less than a quarter of total health expenditure. For India, the share of public expenditure in the total is exactly one-fourth or 25%.

The low share of public health expenditure is not surprising, given the fact that only 13 countries spend a smaller proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) on the health sector than India's level of 1.2%.

Apart from six of the seven mentioned above, these include Pakistan and Bangladesh in our neighbourhood as well as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ivory Coast, Equatorial Guinea and Indonesia.

One result of this low level of government spending on healthcare is that people have to spend more from their pockets to keep themselves in good health. Thus, India's private spending on healthcare at 3.6% of GDP is higher than most. In fact, only 33 of the remaining 176 countries has a higher level on this count.

However, the high private expenditures are clearly unable to bridge the gap when it comes to things like immunisation, which are typically public programmes in most parts of the globe.

Not surprisingly, India's immunisation rate for those who are one-year old against measles is worst in the world, with just 13 countries doing worse.

A similar picture emerges if we look at the numbers for full immunisation of one-year olds against tuberculosis. Again, there are a mere 20 of the 176 others who have a lower rate.

What highlights all of this as a glaring failure of our governments is the fact that India's pool of roughly 6.5 lakh physicians is the third biggest in the world after China, which has about twice as many, and the US, which has only a few tens of thousands of doctors more than India, although for a population that's only about one-third the size of India's.