

Ten Indian women die, dozens sick after mass sterilisation (Update)

11 November 2014

Ten women have died in India and dozens more are in hospital, some in a critical condition, after a state-run programme that pays women to undergo sterilisation went badly wrong, officials said Tuesday.

Sterilisation is one of the most popular methods of family planning in India, where the government provides cash and other incentives to try to control the country's billion-plus population, but rights groups say the system is often abused.

More than 60 women fell ill after undergoing the surgery over the weekend in the central state of Chhattisgarh, and 10 have now died, local official Sonmani Borah told AFP.

"With two more deaths reported today (Tuesday), the death toll in the family planning operation-related case has gone up to 10," Borah told AFP by phone.

Around 80 women had the procedure at the local government-run sterilisation camp.

The women suffered vomiting and a dramatic fall in blood pressure, said Borah, the commissioner for Bilaspur district, where the camp was held.

It was not immediately clear what caused the deaths, but doctors in the state told AFP the women's symptoms suggest the drugs they were given after the relatively simple procedure may have been the cause.

State governments in India frequently organise mass sterilisation camps under a national programme whereby women are given 1,400 rupees (\$23) as an incentive to have the operation.

Under pressure to meet targets, some local governments also offer other incentives such as cars and electrical goods to couples volunteering for sterilisation.

Although the surgery is voluntary, rights groups say the target-driven nature of the programme has led to women being coerced into being sterilised, often in inadequate medical facilities.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh suspended four top health officials over the deaths, while a police complaint was lodged against the surgeon who performed the operations.

Singh also announced compensation of 400,000 rupees (\$6,500) for each of the families of those women who died.

Focus on women

Angry residents took to the streets of Bilaspur where many of the women have been hospitalised demanding action against those responsible.

The women had undergone laparoscopic sterilisation, a process in which the fallopian tubes are blocked, usually under general anaesthesia.

The Indian Express daily said the surgeries were carried out by one doctor and his assistant in around five hours.

"There was no negligence. He is a senior doctor. We will probe (the incident)," the chief medical officer of Bilaspur R.K. Bhanghe told the newspaper.

Last year, authorities in eastern India came under fire after a news channel unearthed footage showing scores of women dumped unconscious in a field following a mass sterilisation.

The women had all undergone the procedure at a hospital that local officials said was not equipped to accommodate such a large number of patients.

In 2011, the government issued guidelines outlining the standard operating procedures for sterilisation services in camps.

But a 2012 report by Human Rights Watch urged the government to set up an independent grievance redress system to allow people to report coercion and poor quality services at sterilisation centres.

It also said the government should prioritise training for male government workers to provide men with information and counselling about contraceptive choices.

But despite the recommendations to the national government, problems persist on the ground.

India's family planning programme has traditionally focused on women, and experts say that male sterilisation is still not accepted socially.

Government figures from 2008 show that around one third of the 54 percent of the population that reported using any form of family planning opted for female sterilisation.

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