

India's 'Medicine Baba' gets drugs from rich, gives to poor

24 July 2015, by Rishabh R. Jain



In this June 8, 2015 photo, Omkarnath, center, who goes by the name "Medicine Baba," gives medicine to the relative of a severely ill patient at his rented medicine store room in New Delhi, India. The chatty, 79-year-old retired blood-bank technician has been collecting unused prescription drugs from the affluent for the past eight years, and distributing whatever hasn't expired to patients who need medicines they cannot afford. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Omkarnath spends his days searching New Delhi for drugs. A call to the phone number printed boldly on his saffron-colored tunic reveals his alternate identity: "Hello, I am Medicine Baba."

The chatty, 79-year-old retired blood-bank technician has been collecting unused [prescription drugs](#) from the affluent for the past eight years, and distributing whatever hasn't expired to patients who need medicines they cannot afford.

Omkarnath, who like many Indians uses only one name, is not a trained pharmacist, and must see a doctor's prescription before he'll help supply any drug. He doesn't charge, though he says the value of what he gives away each month is more than \$9,000.

"Every bungalow in Delhi has extra medicines, but they are throwing them in their dustbins," says Omkarnath, who walks with a limp after an accident that left him with dislocated bones in both legs.

"Medicine Baba"—baba is an honorific term meaning wise man—walks more than seven kilometers (four miles), stopping door-to-door to ask for unused medicines. On one such trip Sunday, he had collected a huge bagful of donated prescriptions in just an hour and a half.

Some 40 percent of India's 1.2 billion people have no access to modern medicines because they are too expensive or simply unavailable in government hospitals where supplies are often scarce.

Meanwhile, India is exporting 45 percent of the \$25 billion in pharmaceuticals it produces each year.

Omkarnath began his mission after seeing some construction workers get badly injured in New Delhi. He says he followed the men to government hospitals where they were not given treatment and told to find the drugs they needed elsewhere.



In this June 8, 2015 photo, Omkarnath, who goes by the name "Medicine Baba," sorts out unused medicines donated by people to weed out the expired and used

medicines in New Delhi, India. The chatty, 79-year-old retired blood-bank technician has been collecting unused prescription drugs from the affluent for the past eight years, and distributing whatever hasn't expired to patients who need medicines they cannot afford. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)



He says he has built up a stock of drugs and medical equipment worth tens of thousands of dollars from weekend trips to wealthy neighborhoods and more than a dozen collection boxes set up in private clinics around the city.

He stores his cache in a small rented room next to his home in the fetid slums of Manglapuri in southwest New Delhi. The room is filled with boxes of common flu tablets, insulin injections and cancer medications. Omkarnath also arranges donations of equipment including hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, nebulizers, wheelchairs, walkers and oxygen machines.

Many nongovernmental organizations work to give medical care to India's needy, and Omkarnath works with some of them to deliver medicines. But Omkarnath's one-man recycling effort is rare if not unique. There are medicine recycling efforts elsewhere, including the United States, but drugs in those cases are generally donated by medical institutions rather than individuals.

Dr. Lalima Rangwani distributes medicine Omkarnath collects. She said at first she wasn't sure she could trust the drugs he collected.

"But when he brought the medicines, I checked it out, the batch number, all he has written on the list. So only then I got convinced that these are genuine medicines," she said.

India spends just over 1 percent of its gross domestic product on health care—one of the lowest rates in the world.

In this June 27, 2015 photo, Omkarnath, who goes by the name 'Medicine Baba,' calls out to people to donate unused medicines at a government colony in New Delhi, India. The chatty, 79-year-old retired blood-bank technician has been collecting unused prescription drugs from the affluent for the past eight years, and distributing whatever hasn't expired to patients who need medicines they cannot afford. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

"Most states in India don't spend adequately on public health. It is not a priority," leading to drug shortages, says health economist Sakthivel Selvaraj from the Public Health Foundation of India. Private hospitals generally have better supplies, but they charge far more than what hundreds of millions of impoverished Indians can afford.

One of Omkarnath's regular recipients is 52-year-old Dhulichand, who has been suffering from emphysema for several years. The former shoemaker, who goes by only one name, cannot afford the \$100 it costs for 20 oxygen cylinders he needs to breathe each month.

"I can't move around or even shower without these cylinders," a bedridden Dhulichand says, as a clear tube delivers a steady flow of oxygen to his nostrils from a cylinder against the wall in his tiny concrete room.

"Government hospitals don't take me" because he needs too much care, he says. "They tell me to go back home."

Omkarnath depends on cash donations to cover his costs and modest living expenses, which come to about \$500 a month. Eventually, he hopes to build a nationwide network of [medicine](#) banks.

"My efforts make up merely a drop worth of solution to a huge ocean of problems," Omkarnath says through the last few teeth left in his mouth. "I hope before I die this becomes a bigger movement and I contribute at least a glassful."

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